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HIS EXCELLENCY

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EMILE ZOLA

Translated from the French with an introduction by

ALEC BROWN



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INTRODUCTION

It is a measure of the superiority of his artist's sense over his political prejudices that, didactic radical though he was, Emile Zola could base a novel on Louis Napoleon's authoritarian adventures (an early form of fascist rule) without turning it into a political *roman à thèse*. It was also quite a triumph in itself to make *HIS EXCELLENCY* a love story in which the lovers never once consummate their mutual passion.

The novel tells of the relations between a very strong-willed (and strong-minded) woman and a very wilful man, when both are equally, if in different ways, infected with the bug of political ambition allied to love of power. Were it not that it appeared a year or two before Meredith's *THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS*, one might have described it as a great Meredithian novel. But if either novelist was inspired by the other, it was the Englishman by the Frenchman.

In this book Zola's principal characters fuse—or should we say *confuse*—politics and love, yet, brilliant though the political satire may be, it is here never more than the background. Even the story of Louis Napoleon's dangerous dabbling in Italian affairs and his narrow escape from the bomb thrown by Italian revolutionaries is reduced to a mere piece of incidental machinery. Zola concentrates all his analysis on the lovers, ever frustrated by their ambitions, that is, by their artificial, self-imposed ideas about the conduct they should pursue.

In this sense, indeed, though not quite what popular legend expects, *HIS EXCELLENCY* is very characteristic of its author. In more than one of his novels, Zola anticipated ways of understanding the workings of the human soul which were developed as systematic psychological theories only many years later, after the discoveries of Freud. Now, one of Zola's great hunches about sex was that love of a woman weakens a man. As his love for her develops and finds response, she robs him of vital force. Therefore, if a man wishes to preserve his essential strength (and that was Rougon's great preoccupation),

he must remain for ever the master, and never become the slave of his sexual impulses.

In obedience to this doctrine, Zola's hero had never allowed his heart to be taken possession of by a woman. Perhaps he had never met one powerful enough to excite his desires before Clorinda de Balbi suddenly entered his orbit. Then, it was nearly fatal. Half-Italian, half-French, the young adventuress was the daughter of the equally beautiful Italian adventuress, Countess de Balbi, who had been the mistress and would-be master of princes.

So, for the first time, the great political climber is smitten. Paradoxically, worshipping his political strength, the eccentric girl is also a victim of love. What will happen? To Rougon, sex is still a mere accessory. He therefore decides that not marriage, but a fleeting liaison, is indicated. Will Clorinda yield to him, and herself? A tremendous contest of wills begins. All goes well, till Rougon tries to take her. Clorinda, however, is more aware of the law that governs these things than he is. She keeps him off—with a riding-whip. Marriage first! Rougon refuses. Not for the usual male reason, to preserve his liberty, but because: “. . . it never does to try to combine two powerful wills.”

Only now the real story (which must be left to the reader) begins. It is a merciless struggle, in which organizing the unsuccessful assassination of the Emperor, contriving (successfully) to get into his bed, and the involvement of France in European war, are mere moves in Clorinda's "legitimate" game.

A word about the form, for this is fascinating. It is half a drama-novel, half-way between the pure drama-novels (such as *MADELEINE FERAT*) and what we might call the "panorama-novels", (such as *NANA*). It is planned with classical rigour, the action tense from the outset. Once we grasp the special scale of measurement which is inevitable when, instead of describing wide reaches of a scene, or large, shifting groups of people, the author concentrates his light on a selected handful of characters, it is with our own breath as tensely held as that of the protagonists that we reach Rougon's ultimate triumph.

Real suspense is maintained at a high level throughout by very clever designing. The first climax comes one-third of the way through, so that *ACT ONE* consists of chapters 1-5. The second climax (when Rougon tries again to consummate his

love and Clorinda for the second time rebuffs him) comes with astonishing symmetry two-thirds of the way through; Act Two comprises chapters 6-9.

Behind the personal drama is the public, political one—Rougon's rise to a second period of office, his second fall, and his second and most triumphant resumption of power, and the curve of action of this secondary drama follows a different course, in syncopation with that of the main theme. The intertwining of these two curves—of love and of politics—in what is the final act (ACT THREE, chapters 10-14) makes a triumphant and tense mounting climax. But the very virtuosity of this design all but wrecks this excellent story, and it is perhaps worth while examining why and how.

I suspect that the principal reason why this novel has been found baffling is that though it did not become primarily a *roman à thèse*, we can never forget that it is still a documentary novel. Or rather, it is *almost* a documentary novel. We tend to forget that before the 1871 disaster and the first Commune, France produced the first prototype of Hitler's Reich, namely, the Second Empire. Rougon's assault on the press, his final speech in defence of authoritarianism, and the cynicism with which each prefecture was allotted its quota of political victims may usefully remind us that before Hitler came Gobineau. For there was in cruel fact an early fascist France. There was indeed a Rougon who interned, exiled, even killed innocent victims without process of law. We do wrong to charge the Germans (or the Russians, for that matter) with this invention of despotic rule. Under "Rougon's" rule, some 10,000 persons *were* interned in Cayenne and Algeria (which was not *then* regarded as part of France!). Some 12,000 others *were* taken into "protective custody", as we nicely call it today. Nor should we forget that this was possible because, playing for safety and shrinking from social experiment, over seven million French voters, disliking the rise of the common man, had been misguided enough to vote for the man who was going to save their bacon, and there were less than one million cooler heads who doubted.

This democracy-gone-wrong, this conservativistic folly leading to authoritarianism, was just the sort of thing one would have expected the radical in Zola to spend many pages in attacking. When we remember this, we are brought back to the cardinal puzzle of this book: how came the propagandist in Zola to yield place here to the poet of the human heart?

Perhaps the reason was not so much a positive as a negative one. Even in the Third Republic, a political satirist could not be fully frank about the fallen Empire. Zola felt too close. From the documentary novel he was compelled to retreat into the imaginary. In one of his personal notebooks the author suggested to himself that he should make Rougon "a little like de Morny" (who had actually played the part under Napoleon III). But we must surely also see a hint of de Morny's portrait in de Marsy.

The fact is, we do wrong to seek any very precise identification of personalities. By the time pen was put to paper, the equally fascinating conflict of wills of the two lovers had finally ousted the political cause from Zola's imagination. The documentary novel faded, leaving the story of love-conflict between the sexes. For us today it matters less than it did for Zola's contemporaries. Since he wrote, bigger and—one almost writes "better"—Louis Napoleons have appeared, and should teach us our lesson about bacon-savers. Zola's frustration, moreover, proves our more permanent fortune, and I have no doubt that he would forgive us, could he know today that we now read his story not as a political warning, but for its exquisite love drama.

ALEC BROWN

February, 1958.

CHAPTER ONE

THE President of the Chamber stood for a moment while the faint stir caused by his entry subsided. Then, with a rather nonchalant *sotto-voce* declaration that the sitting was open, he took his seat, and proceeded to sort out the proposals for legislation laid out on the massive desk before him. On his left hand, a short-sighted secretary, nose well down on the paper, gabbled through the minutes of the previous sitting in a mumble that not a single deputy heeded. In the general background of noise of the assembly this reading of the minutes reached only the ears of the ushers. They, in direct contrast to the carefree postures of the members of the Chamber, were very solemn.

There were not a hundred deputies present. Some lolled back on the red plush seats, their eyes vague, already dozing. Others leant over their desks as if burdened by this forced effort of a public session and gently tapped at the mahogany with their finger-tips. In through the apse of window which detached a grey half-moon from the sky flooded the rainy May afternoon. The light fell flat and evenly over all the circumstantial severity of the Chamber, pouring down the tiers of benches, a broad red-stained reach, dully glowing, here and there, at the corners of empty seats, picked out by pinkish gleams, while behind the President the naked surfaces of statues and sculptural work retained pools of white light.

In the third rank of seats, on the right, a deputy had remained standing in the narrow gangway. Lost in thought, he was stroking a shaggy ruff of grizzled beard. When an usher came up towards him, he beckoned to the man and put a whispered question to him.

"No, M. Kahn," the usher replied. "The Premier has not arrived yet."

M. Kahn sat down. He turned sharply to the man on his left.

"I say, Béjuin, have you seen anything of Rougon this morning?" he demanded.

M. Béjuin, a thin, swarthy little man, subdued of manner,

looked up. He seemed to be uneasy and preoccupied. He had drawn out the writing-rest of his seat and on blue business notepaper with the heading *Béjuin and Co., Cut-Glass Manufacturers, Saint-Florent*, was busy with correspondence.

"Rougon?" he repeated. "No, I have not seen him. I did not have time to look in at Government House."

With this, he calmly resumed his task. He consulted his diary and began his second letter, while the Secretary of France's Legislative Body continued his indistinct gallop through the minutes.

M. Kahn folded his arms and leant back. The large nose set in his massive features betrayed a Jewish origin, his countenance remained scowling. He peered up at the gilded rosettes of the ceiling, then his glance halted on the water suddenly streaming down the windows as a sharp shower lashed at them. Next, hazy-eyed, he seemed to be intently examining the complicated ornamentation of the immense wall immediately in front of him. His eye was held for a moment by panels at either end drawn with green velvet bearing heraldic devices in gilt framing. Then, having measured up the pairs of columns between which allegorical statues of Liberty and Public Order respectively thrust blank-eyed, marble countenances, he ended up completely absorbed by the green silk curtain which concealed the wall-painting of Louis Philippe taking the oath to the Charter.

By now, the Secretary of the Legislative Body had resumed his seat, but the murmur of voices did not abate. In no hurry the President of the Chamber continued to look through papers. Mechanically, at last, he clapped his hand on the bell-push. The loud jangle, however, did not disturb a single one of the private discussions going on, so, standing now amid the hubbub, he remained like that some time, waiting.

"Gentlemen," he began, at last, "I have received a letter."

He broke off to ring again, then once more waited, his worried, grave countenance gazing out beyond the monumental desk which under him extended its blocks of red marble framed in white. His close-buttoned frock coat stood out against the bas-relief built in immediately behind his desk, its black outline cutting through the peplums of Agriculture and Industry, with their classical outlines.

"Gentlemen," he resumed, once he had obtained a modicum of silence, "I have received a letter from M. de Lamberthon,

apologizing for being unable to be present at today's sitting."

A little gust of laughter came from one of the benches, the sixth immediately opposite the desk. It came from a deputy who was quite youthful, twenty-eight years old at most, a charming, fair-haired fellow, now with white hands muffling ripples of quite feminine laughter. A colleague, a burly person, then moved across three seats to whisper a question in his ear:

"What, has de Lamberthon found his wife, then . . . ? You tell me that, if you can, La Rouquette."

The President had taken up a sheaf of papers. He spoke, in a monotonous voice, fragments of his sentences reaching all the way to the far end of the Chamber.

"There are requests for leave of absence . . . M. Blachet, M. Buquin-Lecomte, M. de la Villardière . . ."

While the Chamber was thus requested to grant these deputies leave, and proceeded to do so, M. Kahn, no doubt tiring at last of contemplation of that green silk drawn across the seditious likeness of Louis Philippe, had turned half to the right to gaze at the visitors' gallery. There was a single row of boxes. Between one column and another they reared purple velvet upholstery above a foundation of lake-veined yellow marble. Above them, a valance of gathered leather failed to mask completely the gap caused by the elimination of a second row, which before the Empire had been reserved for press and general public. Flanked by heavy, dun columns which contrived a rather ponderous grandeur round the semi-circle, the narrow boxes were set deep, and were full of shadows. Though three or four bright women's frocks did enliven them a little, they were in the main empty.

"I say, there's Colonel Jobelin come in," murmured M. Kahn.

He gave the Colonel, who had already noticed him, a quick smile. Jobelin was wearing the dark blue frock coat which since his retirement he had adopted as a sort of civilian uniform. With his *Légion d'Honneur* rosette, so that it might have been the knot of his scarf, he was all alone in the questors' box.

Meanwhile, farther away, to the left, M. Kahn's eyes had spotted a young man and a young woman pressed affectionately close in a corner of the Government box. The young man was incessantly bending down to whisper in the young woman's ear. She was smiling benignly, without once looking at him.

Her eyes were all the time fixed on the allegorical representation of *Public Order*.

"What d' y' say to that, eh, Béjuin?" whispered M. Kahn, giving his fellow-deputy a nudge with his knee.

M. Béjuin had reached his fifth letter. He looked up, distracted.

"Up there, come, man, don't say you can't see little d'Escorailles and Bouchard's pretty wife? I'll bet he's pinching her bum. Just look at those dreamy eyes! . . . So all Rougon's friends are going to rally today. Look, there are Mme. Correur and the Charbonnels too, in the public gallery."

There was a drawn-out clanging of the bell and in a lovely bass voice an usher called:

"Pray silence, gentlemen!"

Everybody now gave ear, while the President made the following pronouncement, not a word of which was missed:

"M. Kahn seeks authority to have printed the speech made by him in the debate on the bill regarding the introduction of a municipal tax on carriages and horses in Paris."

A murmur ran through the benches, and men resumed their conversation. M. la Rouquette had come to sit beside M. Kahn.

"So you are working for the common man, are you?" he taunted him, gently. Then, without giving M. Kahn time to answer, he added: "You've not seen Rougon? You have no news? . . . Everybody is talking about it. Apparently nothing is decided yet."

He turned and glanced at the clock.

"Twenty past two already," he said. "I'd be off myself, if that damn exposé had not to be given. . . . Is it really due today?"

"We have all had notice," was M. Kahn's reply. "I have not heard of any countermanding of the decision. You will do well to stay. Passing that vote for four hundred thousand francs for the christening will come on at any minute now."

"I suppose it will," M. La Rouquette agreed. "Old General Legrain, who has lost the use of both his legs at the moment, has just had his footman bring him in. He's out in the Conference room waiting till voting begins. . . . The Emperor had good reason to count on the loyalty of the whole Legislative Body. On such a tremendous occasion, not a single vote should fail him."

The young deputy had made a great effort to give himself the solid appearance of a man of politics. Set off by a few flaxen hairs, his baby face puffed up, swaying slightly, above his neckerchief. For a moment he apparently admired those last two rhetorical phrases which he had contrived. Then, all at once, he broke into laughter.

"Heavens, what mugs the Charbonnells have got!"

M. Kahn and he proceeded to exchange observations at the Charbonnells' expense. Mme. Charbonnel had a scarf which was outrageous, and the husband was wearing one of those provincial frock coats which look as if the tailor had cut with a hatchet. Bulky, both of them, bucolic and overawed figures, they had their chins right down on the velvet of the rail before them, the better to grasp what this sitting of the legislators was all about, and their wide-open eyes were eloquent with utter non-comprehension.

"If Rougon goes," murmured M. La Rouquette, "the Charbonnells' law-suit won't be worth twopence. . . . It's much the same with Mme. Correur . . ."

He leant closer to M. Kahn's ear and in a very low voice continued:

"After all, you yourself, as one who knows Rougon well, tell me straight, what exactly is this Mme. Correur, eh? Used to keep an hotel, didn't she? Years back, Rougon was one of her regulars. It's even said that she once lent him some money. . . . But what does she do now?"

M. Kahn turned grave. With slow hand he stroked his ruff of beard.

"Mme. Correur is a very respectable lady," he said, primly.

This pronouncement cut M. La Rouquette's curiosity short. He pursed his lips, rather like a reprimanded schoolboy. For a moment the two men gazed at Mme. Correur in silence. Sitting near the Charbonnells, she was in a lilac-coloured silk gown. It was rather a loud gown, with a great deal of lace and jewellery. Her face was altogether too pink, her forehead was lost under goldilocks curls, and she revealed a great deal of plump bosom, but she was still very good-looking, in spite of her forty-eight years.

Then, all at once, at the far end of the Chamber, a door opened noisily and there came a great rustle of petticoats, which made many heads turn. A tall girl of great beauty, but

eccentrically dressed in a badly cut Nile-green satin gown, had just entered the Diplomatic box, followed by a middle-aged woman in black.

"I say, the fair Clorinda!" whispered M. La Rouquette, rising at least to register a bow.

M. Kahn followed suit. He leant over towards M. Béjuin, now busy tucking his letters into their envelopes.

"What do you think of that, Béjuin?" he whispered, "Countess de Balbi and her daughter are here . . . I'll run up and ask if they have not perhaps seen Rougon."

The President of the Chamber had taken a new bundle of papers from his desk. Without breaking off their perusal, he shot a quick glance at lovely Clorinda Balbi, whose arrival had thus set the whole assembly a-buzz, before passing the sheets one by one to a secretary, he gabbled them through without any attempt at punctuation:

"Submission of a Bill aimed at postponing the charging of a surtax by Lille Urban Excise Authority. . . . Submission of a Bill concerning the merging of the Communes of Doulevant-le-Petit and Ville-en-Blaisais (Haute Marne)."

When M. Kahn made his way back to his seat, he was quite disconsolate.

"Absolutely nobody has seen him," he told his colleagues, Béjuin and La Rouquette, whom he met at the bottom of the semi-circle. "I've had it on good authority, you see, that the Emperor summoned him yesterday evening. But I do not know what came of the interview. There's nothing more aggravating than not to know what to believe."

While his back was turned, M. La Rouquette whispered in M. Béjuin's ear:

"Poor old Kahn's damned afraid lest Rougon falls out with the Court. 'Twould be goodbye to his railway."

Whereupon M. Béjuin, who said so little, gravely made the following declaration:

"The day that Rougon relinquishes the Government of this country will be everybody's loss."

With this pronouncement, Béjuin beckoned to an usher, to ask him to post the letters he had just written.

The three deputies remained standing near the President's desk, to the left, cautiously discussing the threat or Rougon's falling out of favour. It was a complex story. A distant relative of the Empress, a landed gentleman named Rodriguez, had

since 1808 been suing the French Government for two million francs. During the war with Spain, this Rodriguez, a ship-owner, had a cargo of sugar seized in the Bay of Biscay and taken in to Brest by a French frigate, the *Vigilante*. The result of the local enquiry was that without reference to the Prize Council, the Government representatives declared the seizure was valid. Rodriguez subsequently died, but through all the changes of government, his son had vainly been endeavouring to revive the suit, till at last a word behind the scenes from his illustrious great-grand-cousin had finally got the case on the list.

Over their heads the three deputies could hear the monotonous tones of the President, droning on:

"Submission of a Bill to authorize the Calvados Department to float a three hundred thousand franc loan. . . . Submission of a Bill to authorize the city of Amiens to float a loan of two hundred thousand francs for the construction of new walks. . . . Submission of a Bill to authorize the Côtes-du-Nord Department to float a loan of three hundred and forty-five thousand francs, to cover the deficit of the past five years. . . ."

"The truth," said M. Kahn, lowering his voice still further, "is that the original Rodriguez was on to a very ingenious scheme, worked together with a son-in-law, domiciled in New York. He owned twin ships which, according to the dangers of the crossing, sailed under either the American or the Spanish flag. . . . Rougon has assured me that the ship seized did undoubtedly belong to Rodriguez, but there was no ground whatsoever for recognizing his claim."

"The more so," added M. Béjuin, "since the procedure followed was foolproof. According to the custom of the port, the officer in charge at Brest had an absolute right to pronounce the seizure valid, without any reference to the Prize Council."

There was a silence. M. La Rouquette, who was leaning against the marble pediment of the President's desk, peered up, trying to draw fair Clorinda's attention.

"But why?" he asked, naively, "why does Rougon not want the Rodriguez fellow to be paid two millions? What harm would it do him?"

"It involves a question of conscience," declared M. Kahn, gravely.

M. La Rouquette looked first at one, then the other of his colleagues, but, finding them unsmiling, did not venture the smile which was ready.

"Besides," M. Kahn went on, as if answering questions he did not put in so many words, "Rougon has his worries, ever since the Emperor appointed Count de Marsy Minister of the Interior. They never could stand each other. . . . Rougon has told me himself that were he not so devoted to the Emperor, whom he has already rendered so many services, he would long since have withdrawn into private life. . . . In short, Rougon is no longer in favour at Court and feels a need to make a fresh start."

"The promptings of a man of integrity," M. Béjuin repeated.

"Indeed," said M. La Rouquette, knowingly. "And if Rougon wishes to retire, this is a fine opportunity. . . . All the same, his friends will be very put out. Just look at the Colonel up there, see how worried he looks, he was so counting on a bit of red ribbon round his neck next August 15th. . . . And pretty little Mme. Bouchard, who had sworn that her worthy hubby would be a Principal in the Ministry of the Interior before six months were out! Rougon's pet, little d'Escorailles, was to slip the letter of appointment under Bouchard's plate on Madame's birthday. . . . But where on earth are they, little d'Escorailles, I mean, and pretty Madame Bouchard?"

All three looked about for them, at last to discover them now right at the end of the gallery, of which when the sitting began, they had been occupying the front seats. They had taken shelter there out of the full light behind a bald, elderly man. They were both very subdued and red in the face.

At this point the President completed his reading. He brought out the final words in a very subdued voice, as if quite abashed by the uncouthness of the final sentence: "Submission of a Bill to authorize an augmentation of the rates of interest of a loan authorized by the law of June 9th, 1853, likewise a special surtax by the La Manche Department."

M. Kahn had now run to meet a deputy entering the Chamber. He brought him across.

"Here's M. de Combelot. . . . He'll tell us the news!"

M. de Combelot, however, a chamberlain appointed Deputy by the Landes Department on the Emperor's explicit desire, confined himself to bowing discreetly and waiting for questions to be put to him. He was a tall, handsome individual, with an inky-black beard set on a very white

skin, a combination which won him great success with the ladies.

"Well," interrogated M. Kahn, "what's the news at the Castle? What has the Emperor decided?"

"Good gracious me," replied M. de Combelot, who spoke with a thick "r". "All sorts of tales are going the rounds. The Emperor is most friendly disposed towards the Prime Minister, you know. There is no doubt about it, the interview between them was very cordial. . . . Yes, very cordial!"

But here he paused, weighing his words, and not quite sure whether he had not already said too much.

"Then the resignation is withdrawn, is it?" cried M. Kahn, his eyes glistening.

"Oh, I did not say that," cried the Chamberlain, anxiously. "I know nothing. You must realize, I am in a peculiar position. . . ."

He did not go on, merely smiled, then all at once hurried away to his seat. M. Kahn shrugged his shoulders, and turned to M. La Rouquette.

"But, I was just thinking," he said, "you ought to be *au fait* yourself. Does your sister, Mme. de Llorentz, tell you nothing?"

"Oh, my sister is even less talkative than M. de Combelot," said the young deputy, with a laugh. "Ever since she became a Lady-in-Waiting she has been as grave as any cabinet minister. . . . Nevertheless, she did assure me yesterday that the resignation would be accepted. . . . There's a nice little story being told à propos of it all. Apparently a lady was sent to sway Rougon. And do you know what old Rougon actually did? He showed her the door at once—and bear in mind that she was a delightful person, too."

"Rougon is a man of great restraint," declared M. Béjuin, gravely.

M. La Rouquette was seized with uncontrollable laughter. He would have none of that. He could have told them a thing or two, he said, had he wished to.

"Why," he whispered. "Take Mme. Correur. . . ."

"Never!" cried M. Kahn. "You simply don't know the ins and outs of that."

"Very well, then, but what about the lovely Clorinda?"

"Nonsense! Rougon is far too strong-charactered to forget himself with that big hussy."

Here these three put their heads together, to plunge into a

spicy exchange of information, with some very unvarnished expressions used. They related stories going the rounds about those two Italian women, mother and daughter, whether adventuresses or ladies of the upper ten, who were to be found everywhere, in all the smart crowds, at ministerial receptions, in the stage boxes of the little theatres, at fashionable watering-places, in dubious out-of-town inns. The mother, so some men swore, had been the mistress of a certain crowned head, while with an ignorance of French conventions which made her a "great hussy", most eccentric and with shocking manners, the daughter rode horses to the death, traipsed about town on foot on rainy days, showing mud-bespattered stockings and dirty petticoats, and was husband-chasing with the brazen smiles of a woman who knows all there is to be known. M. La Rouquette told how she had recently attended a ball given by the Italian ambassador, Count de Rusconi, as *Diana the Huntress*, and so undressed that she nearly had an offer of marriage the very next morning from old M. de Nougarede, a Senator with a very lively appetite. Throughout this story the three deputies' eyes were constantly on this fair Clorinda who now, in sheer defiance of the rules and regulations, was peering at one member of the Legislative Body after another through enormous opera glasses.

"No, no," insisted M. Kahn, "Rougon would never be so crazy! . . . He says she's a young person with a very good head on her shoulders. He laughingly calls her Miss Machiavelli. She amuses him. But that's all there is in it."

"All the same," was M. Béjuin's conclusion, "Rougon is making a mistake not to marry. . . . It settles a man."

The three then found complete agreement on the sort of wife Rougon ought to have: getting on in years, thirty-five at least, with money, one whose married life was above suspicion.

So engrossed were they in their scandal-mongering that they had failed to notice what a hubbub had now arisen, or what was happening all round them. The cries of the ushers were already receding down the corridors. "Session, gentlemen, session!" they were calling, and there were new deputies pouring in from all sides. The massive double doors of mahogany were wide open, revealing the gilt stars of their panelling. Till now half-empty, the Chamber was at last gradually filled. The little groups of men lolling across the benches, chatting, and the sleepers, stifling their yawns, were

all submerged under a mounting flood, lost in a wholesale distribution of handshakes. Taking their seats, to right and left alike, the members of the Legislative Body exchanged smiles. They were rather like a family party, though at the same time their physiognomies were also extremely conscious of the power they had come there to exercise. A bulky fellow on the last bench to the left, who had fallen into too deep a slumber, was forcibly awakened by his neighbour. When at last he grasped the meaning of the few words whispered in his ear, he quickly rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and assumed a more seemly pose. After dragging on through business which these gentry found most tedious, the sitting was about to become one of capital interest.

Urged on by the throng coming in, M. Kahn and his two colleagues made their way up to their own seats without even noticing it. They continued to gossip all the way, choking with laughter. M. La Rouquette was telling yet another tale about the fair Clorinda. Apparently, one day she had conceived the fantastic notion of having her room draped with black hangings covered with silver tears and had held a reception in bed, with a black counterpane drawn up to her chin and no more than the tip of her nose showing.

Only as M. Kahn took his seat, did he come to himself.

"What a fool," he muttered, "that fellow La Rouquette is with his scandal! Now he's made me miss Rougon again!" Turning furiously to his neighbour, he snapped: "I say, Béjuin, you might have tipped me off."

Rougon had indeed just entered the Chamber, to be conducted to his place with the customary ceremonial due the Premier. There he sat, flanked by Councillors of State, on the Government bench, which was a sort of monumental mahogany chest placed immediately under the President's desk, just where the abolished public gallery had been before. His enormous shoulders stretched his green uniform, with gilt facings on collar and cuffs, to bursting point. Facing the Chamber, with thick head of grizzled hair massed over square forehead, he dimmed his eyes under those heavy lids which were never more than half open. On his tall expanse of cheek his sixty-six years had not left a wrinkle, but possessed an uncouth vulgarity illuminated nevertheless at moments by the beauty of the man's essential vitality. Unruffled, he leant back, his chin buried in his coat collar. He seemed indifferent,

perhaps even a little fatigued, and might have seen nobody.

"He looks just like he does any other day," whispered M. Béjuin.

The serried ranks of deputies craned their necks, to see Rougon's expression, and a rustle of subdued whispers ran from one to another. But it was above all in the galleries that Rougon's entry had made a lively impression. To demonstrate their presence, the Charbonnells reached their enraptured faces so far forward that they were in danger of falling over the edge. Mme. Correuer contrived a little fit of coughing, and drew out a handkerchief which she brandished airily, with the excuse of pressing it to her lips. Colonel Jobelin drew himself very erect, while pretty little Mme. Bouchard slipped quickly forward again from the back of the gallery, followed by M. d'Escorailles, who was speechless and much put out by this. A little out of breath, she now busied herself re-tying the ribbon of her hat, while the fair Clorinda revealed a complete absence of embarrassment. When at last she saw that Rougon was not going to look up, with her opera-glasses she gave a series of distinct taps on the marble column against which she was leaning. And when Rougon still did not look at her, she turned to her mother and, speaking so distinctly that the whole Chamber could hear her, said:

"He's sulking, the bad-tempered old bear!"

A number of deputies turned towards her, grinning. Rougon now deigned to accord fair Clorinda a glance and when he added an imperceptible nod, she was so triumphant that she flung her head back, clapped her hands, and laughed, after which she began to chatter away loudly to her mother, without the least concern for all those men staring up at her.

Slowly, before lowering those heavy lids again, Rougon surveyed the gallery with an all-embracing glance. In one sweep he took in Mme. Bouchard, Colonel Jobelin, Mme. Correuer and the Charbonnells. With expressionless features, he again sank his chin in his coat-collar, his eyes half closed, and stifled a faint yawn.

"All the same, I will go and have a word with him," M. Kahn whispered in M. Béjuin's ear.

However, just as M. Kahn was getting up, the President, who had just been casting his eye round to make sure that all the deputies really were in place, imperiously clanged the bell and there was immediately a dead silence. A fair man rose to

his feet on the front bench, which was of yellow marble, with a white marble writing ledge. In his hand he clutched a huge sheet of paper on which as he spoke he kept his eyes fixed.

"I have the honour," he intoned, in sing-song voice, "to offer the Chamber an analysis of a Bill granting the Ministry of State the right under the provisions of 1856 to make an allocation of four hundred thousand francs for the Christening and Christening celebration expenses of the Imperial Prince."

He was, so it seemed, proceeding slowly to place this Bill on the table when with a unison which was perfect the whole Assembly set up a cry of:

"Text, please, full text!"

The deputy who had introduced the bill waited till the President of the Assembly had decided that the whole text should be read out. Then, in tones verging on the sentimental, he began:

"Gentlemen, this Bill which has been laid before us is one of those that make the ordinary method of voting seem far too slow, since this serves but to act as a brake on the spontaneous enthusiasm of this Legislative Body."

"*Hear! Hear!*" came from a number of deputies.

"In the humblest home," the speaker continued, pronouncing every word with rhetorical emphasis, "the birth of a son, of an heir, with all those notions of handing something on which are bound up with the word, is the occasion for such sweet delight that any trials of the past are immediately cast to limbo and hope alone hovers over the cradle of the new-born son. What then must we say of that domestic celebration when it is also that of a great nation, and when in addition it is an event in European history?"

This was ravishing to everybody, eloquence which intoxicated the Chamber. Rougon—who might have been asleep—now saw before him nothing but rank on rank of radiant countenances, some deputies even underlining their attentiveness by cupping their ears in their hands, as if anxious not to lose a single word of such perfect prose. After a brief pause the speaker raised his voice and continued:

"Here, gentlemen, is it not indeed the great family of all Frenchmen that calls on every one of its members to express his or her delight. Were it feasible for mere outward manifestation to match the immensity of the legitimate hopes of our citizens, what pomp and circumstance would not be required!"

Here the speaker contrived a further pause, while the same voices as before cried:

"Hear! Hear!"

"Very nicely put," observed M. Kahn. "What do you say, Béjuin?"

M. Béjuin's gaze was rapturously fixed on the great chandelier dangling in the apse of the Chamber. His head swayed. He was in throes of delight.

In the public gallery, her opera-glasses levelled at the speaker, fair Clorinda was busy capturing every shade of expression. The Charbonnels' eyes were swimming, Mme. Correur had assumed the attentive pose of a real lady, while the Colonel was signifying his approbation by a series of nods and pretty Mme. Bouchard was uninhibitedly seeking the support of M. d'Escorailles' knees. At the Presidential desk, however, the President and his Secretaries, together with the ushers, heard it all in utter gravity, with impassive features.

"The cradle of the Imperial Prince," the speaker resumed, "is from now on the rock on which is based our future, for by ensuring the dynasty that we have all acclaimed, that cradle serves to guarantee our country's well-being, serves to guarantee the peace of a France which has found stability, and thereby that of all Europe besides."

Here cries of "*Hush!*" were required to keep the enthusiasm from exploding prematurely into a furore of applause prompted by this touching allusion to the rôle of the cradle.

"In an earlier epoch a scion of this same illustrious stock seemed similarly destined to play a great role. But between that age and this there is no resemblance. Just as it was the genius of war that gave us that epic which was the First Empire of France, so now our peace derives from that wise and clever rule the fruits of which we are now harvesting. Greeted at his birth by the guns which in those days from North to South were proclaiming the triumphs of our armies, the King of Rome was not to be similarly blessed to serve his Fatherland; Providence determined otherwise."

"Where on earth is the man getting to now? That's a bit too deep," whispered sceptical M. La Rouquette. "Most clumsy, the whole passage. He's going to spoil his speech!"

There was no doubt, all the deputies were getting a little worried. Whatever was the purpose of that reference to past history. Why thus damp their enthusiasm? Here and there

some even blew their noses. But the speaker was well aware of the sudden chill this last piece of rhetoric had produced. He smiled and raised his voice again, to proceed to the antithesis. Sure of the result, he measured his words deliberately:

"But, on this occasion, come into the world on one of those solemn days when in the birth of one child is to be seen the well-being of all, this Child of France born to us seems to bring both the present generation and the generations to come after us the right to live our lives and die in the homes of our ancestors. This is what from now on God's mercy grants us."

It was a well-chosen antithesis. Not one of the deputies but grasped its meaning, and a breath of relief swept through the Chamber. This assurance of eternal peace was sweet indeed. Relieved now, these gentlemen resumed their delightful posturings, men of politics for once revelling in literature. Yes, now they had a great breathing-space before them. Europe was their master's. For, in a new burst of confidence, the speaker proceeded to inform them that now that the Emperor had become the decisive factor in European affairs, he was going to sign that generous Act of Peace which now that it pleased God to crown his fortune and his fame at one stroke, would bring together in one effort the productive forces of all the nations and be an alliance of peoples as much as of Kings. Was it not then legitimate to think, when one looked down on that cradle in which—still such a tiny fellow—lay he who would continue his father's great policy, that from this moment on one had a vista of many long prosperous years?

This too was a very fine flight of rhetoric. What is more, there was no doubt about its being legitimate, and the deputies all confirmed that this was so with gentle nods. Nevertheless, the speech was beginning to seem a trifle lengthy. Many members became grave again. Indeed, there were some who began to cast sly glances at the public gallery. Were they not practical men? They could not help feeling a certain embarrassment, thus exposing themselves and the undress side of their politics.

Others were lost in thought, their faces grey, their minds on their own affairs, and these tapped their mahogany benches with uneasy fingers. Vaguely, memory relived earlier sittings of the assembly and loyalties of times past, when powers were accorded to another cradle.

Time and again M. La Rouquette turned to see the time. When the hands reached a quarter to three he made a gesture of resignation. He was missing an appointment. Side by side, M. Kahn and M. Béjuin were motionless, arms folded, only their eyes blinking as they looked up from the extensive panels of green velvet to that white marble *bas-relief* against which the President's frock-coat was a black silhouette.

All this time, fair Clorinda was there in the diplomatic box with her opera-glasses levelled. She was again examining Rougon, at great length too. Rougon was motionless. He was like a magnificent bull sleeping.

The speaker, however, was in no hurry. He forged ahead, as if to please himself, reading it all out with reverent, rhythmic movements of his shoulders.

"So let us then rest assured we may be completely confident. And on this great and solemn occasion let the Legislative Body not forget the parity of origin which it shares with the Emperor, for that parity gives it almost family rights, so that over and above all other bodies in the State it can claim to share fully in the Sovereign's delight. Being, like the Emperor himself, the child of the free will of the people, the Legislative Body at this moment thereby becomes the very voice of the Nation, in order to show the august infant in the cradle the homage of unfailing respect and a devotion proof against everything, as well as that limitless love which transforms political faith into a religion the observance of which is sacred."

Ah, now that the fellow had come to homage and religion and the observance of religion, it must be getting near the end. The Charbonnells, indeed, now risked a whispered exchange of impressions, while Mme. Correur muffled another faint, slight cough in her handkerchief, and Mme. Bouchard withdrew discreetly again to the rear of the Government box, with M. Jules d'Escorailles close beside her.

And now the speaker adopted a different tone. Swooping down from solemnity to familiarity, he suddenly gabbled out:

"Well, gentlemen, what we propose is the adoption in its entirety, without any amendment of this Bill as put forward by the Government."

And down he squatted amid a general hubbub, as the whole assembly applauded him. There were even cries of "Bravo!" M. de Combelot, whose beaming attention had never failed

for an instant, even ventured a cry of "Long Live the Emperor!" though this was lost in the general din. Colonel Jobelin, however, erect at the edge of the box which he alone occupied, so far forgot the regulations as to clap his bony hands, to come in almost for an ovation. All the gush of the speaker's opening phrases reappeared in a fresh flood of congratulations. The assembly's labours were over. There was an exchange of charming phrases from bench to bench. A wave of friends surged towards the man who had introduced the Bill, to pump away hard at both his hands.

Soon, however, a repeated phrase began to dominate the general clamour. Deputies were asking for the debate to be opened. Apparently this was just what the President, on his feet at his desk, had been waiting for. He clanged his bell, then addressed the assembly, suddenly hushed with respect.

"Gentlemen," he said, "many members are requesting an immediate procedure to the debate."

His words were met with a unanimous murmur of approval. And nobody spoke against the motion. They proceeded to the division immediately. The two sections of the Bill were in turn put to the vote, the ayes to rise from their seats. Scarce was the reading of either section off the President's lips, when with great shuffling of feet, from top to bottom of the tiers of seats the deputies rose in a solid block, as if swept up by a wave of enthusiasm. The voting-urns then went the rounds, the ushers making their way between the rows, collecting the votes in tin boxes, and the four hundred thousand francs allocation was accorded by a unanimous vote of two hundred and thirty-nine deputies.

"A fine piece of work accomplished," declared M. Béjuin naively, and with a beaming smile, as if he had produced an apothegm of profound sagacity.

"It's past three, I must be flying," whispered M. La Rouquette, edging past M. Kahn.

The Chamber emptied. Silently reaching the doors, deputy after deputy seemed to melt away into the wall. The agenda now consisted exclusively of Bills of purely local interest. Soon there were only those good-natured deputies left who no doubt had nothing else to do that afternoon. These resumed their interrupted naps or continued their conversations where these had been broken off, and the sitting ended as it had begun, amid undisturbed indifference. Even the over-all murmur

tended gradually to die down, as if France's Legislative Body had finally found sleep in a silent corner of Paris.

"I say, Béjuin," said M. Kahn, "as we go out, do try to sound Delestang. He was with Rougon when he came in, he must know something about it."

"By Jove, you are right, it is Delestang," cried M. Béjuin, in an undertone, and stared at the State Councillor seated on Rougon's left, "I never recognize them in these damned uniforms."

"The only reason I'm staying on is to get hold of our great man," added M. Kahn. "We must find out."

The President put an endless string of Bills to the vote, and they were all dealt with by the same public procedure. Mechanically the deputies rose from their seats and sat down again, without breaking off their conversations or even their sleep. The tedium became such that the handful of sightseers in the galleries had left. Only Rougon's friends hung on. They were still hoping to hear him speak.

Suddenly a deputy with the formal side-whiskers of a country lawyer rose, an act which suddenly halted the monotonous functioning of this voting machine quite sharply. All heads turned in lively surprise.

"Gentlemen," declared the deputy, standing at his place, "I must explain the reasons which, almost against my will, compel me to differ from the majority of the Committee."

The voice was so strident and queer that it was only by burying her face in her hands that fair Clorinda stifled an explosion of laughter. Among the deputies the astonishment grew greater and greater. Who in earth could this be? Why-ever was the fellow speaking? Enquiry, however, elucidated that the President had just opened the debate on a new Bill which would authorize the Eastern Pyrenees Department to raise a loan of two hundred thousand francs to erect a Law Court Building at Perpignan. The speaker was a Councillor of that Department, and he was opposed to the suggestion.

This looked as if it might be interesting, and was carefully listened to. A person with prim side-whiskers, however, the speaker proceeded with the maximum of caution, producing periods tight-packed with reticence, in all of which he solemnly took off his hat to a great variety of public offices. The gist of his objection was apparently that the financial burdens of

the department was already heavy. He proceeded, indeed, now to furnish an exhaustive picture of the whole financial position of the Eastern Pyrenees. Apart from this, he said, the need for a new Law Court building did not seem to him to have been proved. He went on speaking on these lines for nearly fifteen minutes. By the time he sat down he was quite worked up. Rougon had at first opened wide eyes, but slowly his eyelids had drooped again.

Now it was the turn of the introducer of the Bill, a very vivacious little veteran of a deputy, to speak. He had a very precise enunciation, and spoke like a man sure of his ground. First, however, he had a number of polite things to say about the honourable friend who had just spoken, but with whom he regretted he was not in agreement. He then had to protest that the Eastern Pyrenees Department was far from being as financially burdened as his honourable friend had made out. Therefore, though using quite different figures, he too felt bound to produce a complete analysis of the financial position in the department. In addition, he said, it was impossible to deny the real need for a new *Palais de Justice* at Perpignan. Here too he went into details. The old building was in so crowded a part of the town that the noise of the traffic made it impossible for the bench to hear what lawyers were saying. In addition, it was too small, so that whenever at assizes the witnesses in any case were numerous, they had to wait outside on the landing, which exposed them to dangerous influences. The introducer of the Bill wound up by throwing in, as irresistible, the argument that the initiation of this Bill had been due to the Keeper of the Seal himself.

Fists on thighs, head resting firm on the bench behind him, Rougon was motionless. When this debate had opened, his massive shoulders had seemed merely to become more massive. But now, ponderously, just as the first speaker began to evince a desire to reply, he raised his huge frame, though without bringing it to a completely erect posture, and in a mealy voice he mumbled one single sentence.

"The introducer of this Bill," he said, "omitted to mention that both the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Finance have signified their approval."

With this, he slumped back in his seat and resumed his previous slumbering-bull posture.

A slight flutter ran through the Chamber. The would-be

speaker bowed low, and resumed his seat. And the Bill was passed. The handful of members who had shown interest in the debate again assumed an air of indifference.

Rougon had spoken! From one box to another, Colonel Jobelin and the Charbonnells exchanged winks, while Mme. Correur made preparations to leave her seat, much as, before the curtain comes down, one slips out of a theatre box the moment the principal man utters his concluding tirade. M. d'Escorailles and Mme. Bouchard had already left. On her feet against a background of velvet, a magnificent, tall figure dominating the Chamber, Clorinda slowly wrapped a lace wrap about her shoulders, surveying the whole amphitheatre as she did so.

The rain had now ceased drumming on the windows of the apse, but a huge cloud still darkened the sky. In that muddy light the mahogany of the benches looked black. A cloud of shadow swept over the tiers of seats. The only patches of light were the bald pates of deputies. The President, the Secretaries and the ushers, now stood out in a row like stiff Chinese shadows against the marble of the podium, above them the vague pallor of the allegorical statuary. The sitting was engulfed in this sudden failure of the daylight.

"Heavens, how deadly it all is!" cried Clorinda, as she urged her mother out of the gallery, to turn the heads of the ushers dozing on the landing by the extravagant way in which she had wrapped her lace scarf round her loins.

Down below, in the hall, the ladies came upon Colonel Jobelin and Mme. Correur.

"We are waiting for him," said the Colonel. "He may come out this way. . . . Besides, I nodded to Kahn and Béjuin to come and give me the news."

Mme. Correur went up to Countess de Balbi, then, in tones of lamentation, "Oh, what a misfortune it would be!" she declared, without specifying what.

The Colonel raised his eyes to Heaven.

"The country needs men like Rougon," he said, after a silence. "The Emperor would be making a mistake."

The silence resumed. Clorinda tried to peep into the lobby, but an usher quickly closed the door on her. She rejoined her mother, silent under her violet veil.

"It's boring to wait," she murmured.

A posse of soldiers entered. The Colonel declared that the

sitting must be over. He was right. The Charbonnells now appeared at the top of the stairs. Cautiously they descended, clinging to the hand-rail, one behind the other. When M. Charbonnel caught sight of the Colonel, he cried:

"Ah, he was brief, but he certainly stopped their chatter, didn't he?"

"It was lack of opportunity," replied the Colonel, speaking straight into M. Charbonnel's ear, as soon as he drew close enough. "Otherwise you really would have heard him. He needs to get warmed up, you know!"

Meanwhile, the armed guard had formed into two ranks, from the Chamber to the Presidential gallery, which gave on to the hall, and a procession then appeared, while the drums beat a ruffle. Two black-clad ushers led the way, cocked-hats under their arms, chains round their necks, steel-hilted swords at their sides. Next came the Secretaries of the Desk and the Secretary-General of the Presidential Office. Despite the solemnity of the procession, as he passed by her, the President of the Chamber shot Clorinda a man-of-the-world smile.

"Oh, there you are!" cried M. Kahn, running up breathlessly to them, and though the lobby was now out of bounds to the public, he insisted on their going in, all of them. He led them across to the embrasure of one of the large French windows opening on to the garden. He seemed furious.

"I have missed him again!" he said. "He slipped out into the rue Bourgogne while I was on the look-out for him in General Foy's room. . . . But no matter, we'll find out all the same. I've despatched Béjuin to trail Delestang."

There was now a new wait, for ten good minutes. With carefree air, meanwhile, the deputies emerged, pushing aside the green hangings which masked the doors. Some of them lingered a moment, lighting up cigars. Others stood about in little groups, laughing and exchanging handshakes. Mme. Correur had meanwhile stepped across to contemplate the *Laocoon*, and while the Charbonnells turned the other way, to gape at a gull which some painter's bourgeois fantasy had daubed on the framing of a wall-painting, as if the bird had flown out of the actual picture, fair Clorinda took up a stand in front of the large bronze Minerva. She was intrigued by the arms and the bosom of the giant goddess. Colonel Jobelin and M. Kahn were carrying on a lovely *sotto voce* conversation in the embrasure of one of the French windows.

"Ah, here is Béjuin!" the latter cried, suddenly. At once they closed in with eager faces. M. Béjuin was breathing hard.

"Well?" they asked.

"The resignation has been accepted. Rougon is giving up the Premiership."

It was like the blow of a sledge-hammer. In the hush which followed one could have heard a pin drop. Then Clorinda, who was busily tying the ends of her lace wrap in knots, to occupy her agitated fingers, perceived pretty Mme. Bouchard. She was leisurely strolling in the garden on M. d'Escorailles' arm, her head slightly leaning towards his shoulder. The couple had come out before the others, and had taken advantage of an unlocked door to air their sentimental love canopied by the lace canopy of young foliage down these walks usually reserved for grave meditations. Clorinda beckoned to them to come in.

"The great man is resigning," she told the smiling young woman.

In an instant, Mme. Bouchard had relinquished her admirer's arm and was pale and grave, while in the centre of the shattered group of Rougon's friends M. Kahn raised his arms heavenwards in speechless protest.

CHAPTER TWO

THE morning *Moniteur* had carried the news of Rougon's resignation. It was given as "for health reasons". He had come to Government House after lunch. He was anxious to clear up his papers and hand over to his successor that very evening, and he was now seated at his huge rosewood desk in the red room which served as the Premier's office, busily emptying drawers and sorting out papers, which he was tying in bundles with lengths of pink string.

He rang. His commissioner entered, a fine figure of a man, who had served in the cavalry.

"Give me a lighted candle here, Merle, will you?" Rougon demanded.

When the man had set down on the desk one of the little chimney-piece lamps, with its glass candle-drip, and was withdrawing, Rougon called him back.

"By the way, Merle. . . . You're to let nobody in. Understand?" He underlined "Nobody!"

"Very well, Monsieur le Président," the Commissioner replied. Noiselessly he closed the door behind him.

Rougon's features relaxed into a faint smile. Turning to Delestang, who was standing at a filing cabinet at the far end of the room, carefully combing through it, he murmured:

"Our good Merle does not seem to have read this morning's *Moniteur* yet."

Delestang shook his head. What was there to say? He was endowed with a magnificent head, almost entirely bald, that sort of premature baldness, however, which appeals to the ladies. The reach of denuded skull extended his forehead out of all measure lending him a terribly brainy air. His faintly rubicund cheeks and rather square jowl, which had not a hint of hair on it, was suggestive of those rather severe, pensive countenances that imaginative painters like to put on great political figures.

"Of course," he said, after a pause, "Merle is very devoted to you." Then he dived back into the file that he was gutting.

Crumpling up a handful of papers, Rougon ignited them in the candle flame and tossed them into a large bronze bowl standing at one corner of the desk. He watched them burn.

"Leave the bottom files, Delestang, will you?" he said. "There are some there in which only I know my way about."

Both men resumed their task, in silence. For a quarter of an hour not a word was spoken. It was a lovely day, with sunlight pouring in through the windows, which gave on to the Seine embankment. Through one, which had been opened, fresh gusts of air rose from the river. From time to time they puffed the silk curtains into the room, and crumpled papers which had been dropped on to the floor were whisked about, with a faint rustling.

"I say, just look at this!" said Delestang. He handed Rougon a letter which he had just discovered.

Rougon glanced through it, then calmly lighted this too in the candle flame. It was a very personal letter. Thus from time to time the two men raised their noses from the mass of papers and exchanged curt observations. Rougon was grateful to Delestang for coming in to help him. This "good friend" was the only person with whom he could freely sort out the dirty linen of his five years at the head of the French government. He had first met Delestang in the days of the "Legislative Assembly", where they had occupied adjoining seats, and he had first felt a weakness for this handsome man, finding him a delightful mixture of the foolish, the empty-headed, but also the superb. Even then he was wont to make the solemn assertion that "the damn fellow'll go a long way". Later, he promoted him, attaching him to himself by bonds of personal gratitude, making use of him too as a repository for all he could not quite carry on his person.

"What fools we all are, keeping so many papers!" he muttered, as he drew out another drawer which was crammed full.

"I can see a woman's letter there," cried Delestang, with a sidelong glance at the document in question.

Rougon laughed heartily. His broad chest shook. However could that be? But, taking out the letter and glancing at it, he cried:

"This is little d'Escorailles' work, putting that in here! And fine documents such little notes are, too. Three lines in a

feminine hand, that gets you a long way, indeed!" Then, setting light to this letter too, he added:

"Take my advice, Delestang, beware of women!"

Delestang buried himself in his papers. He was always engaged on some shady love-affair. In 1851 he had nearly wrecked his political career altogether, for then his dalliance had been with the wife of a socialist deputy, and many a time, just to placate the husband, he had voted with the opposition against the Bonapartist party. This made the Decree of December 2nd a sledge-hammer blow to him. For two whole days he did not budge from his room. He was utterly crushed. Indeed, he was in terror, expecting arrest at any moment. Rougon had to get him out of that hole. He persuaded him not to put up for re-election at all, but took him round instead to the Elysée Palace, where he wangled for him a position as State Councillor.

Delestang was rich, a millionaire indeed. The son of a Bercy wine merchant, he had formerly been a lawyer. Near Sainte-Menehould he now ran a model farm. In Paris he possessed a very fine mansion in the *rue du Colisée*.

"Yes, keep clear of women," Rougon repeated, pausing after every word to peer into a file. "At one moment they plant a crown on your head, the next they slip a noose round your neck. . . . The fact is, at our age a man ought to nurse his heart as much as he does his stomach."

In the same instant, a sudden hubbub arose in the ante-room. Merle could be heard trying to keep somebody from the door. Then, all of a sudden, in burst a little man.

"But damn it, man," he was crying, to the Commissioner, "he's a personal friend, I *must* shake his hand!"

"Heavens! Du Poizat!" cried Rougon, without stirring from his seat.

As Merle waved his arms in a vain effort to apologize, he curtly ordered the man to shut the door, then, calmly, said:

"Why, I thought you were down at Bressuire. . . . What's this, Mr Deputy Prefect, running away from your post as if it were an old mistress!"

A slight little man with sly appearance and very white, irregular teeth, Du Poizat lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"I arrived early this morning," he said, "on business. I wasn't going to come round to the *rue Marbeuf* to shake your

hand till this evening. As a matter of fact, I had in mind to cadge a spot of dinner. . . . But when I read the *Moniteur!* . . .”

He drew an armchair up to the desk and settled himself down opposite Rougon.

“Well, well, what on earth are things coming to, eh? You see, I have of course been buried away in the country, in my Department. . . . All the same, I had got a feeling, even down in the Deux-Sèvres, that something funny was going on. But I was far from ever imagining. . . . Why on earth did you not write and tell me?”

It was Rougon’s turn to shrug his shoulders. It was obvious that Du Poizat had learned all about his fall down there and had at once come racing up to town to see what he could do to find a foothold for himself somewhere else. He shot Du Poizat a glance which pierced him through, and said:

“I was going to drop you a line this evening. Well, my dear fellow, you resign too, send in your resignation at once.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” Du Poizat replied, like a shot. “Very well, I’ll resign.”

He rose, whistling a tune through his teeth. Slowly he walked across to the *cabinet*. Then, seeing Delestang on his knees on the floor amid a medley of files, without a word he went up to him and shook his hand, then extracted a cigar from his pocket and lit it at the candle on the desk.

“Smoking’s permitted now that you’re moving out,” he said, making himself comfortable again in the armchair. “Moving out’s an intriguing job, eh?”

But Rougon’s attention was now absorbed by a bundle of documents, which he was perusing with great concentration, painstakingly weeding out some for preservation, burning the rest. Du Poizat lolled back in the chair, puffing out thin jets of smoke from the corner of his mouth, and watched him at it. These two had made each other’s acquaintance some months before the February Revolution, when they both lodged in Mme. Mélanie Correux’s *Hôtel Vanneau*, in the *rue Vanneau*. She, like him, was a native of the little town of Coulonges, in the Arrondissement of Niort. Du Poizat’s father, a sheriff’s officer, in spite of having made a nice pile as bucket-shop money-lender, had sent him to Paris to read law, allowing him only one hundred francs a month. Indeed, the old man had made so much that local folk could not quite believe it, that he come by it by honest usury. The allegation was that

when effecting a certain seizure as bailiff, he had found a big sum hidden away in an old cupboard.

From the very beginning of the Bonapartist campaign, Rougon had made use of Du Poizat, then a lanky disgruntled youth existing on those hundred francs a month. Young Du Poizat had a disturbing leer, but together Rougon and he had engaged in the most ticklish of political manoeuvres. When later on Rougon wanted to get into the Legislative Assembly, Du Poizat was his election agent in the Deux-Sèvres Department. Then, after the *coup d'état*, it was Rougon who in turn gave Du Poizat a leg up, getting him appointed Sub-Prefect at Bressuire. Still only just thirty, that young man was keen on climbing to a top appointment here in his own home country, only a few miles from his father, whose meanness had been the bane of his life since he left high school.

"And how is old man Du Poizat?" Rougon enquired, without looking up.

"Too flourishing," Du Poizat replied, bluntly. "He has just sacked his last domestic, just because she got through three pound loaves of bread. Now he keeps two loaded guns by the door. Whenever I go to see him, I have to negotiate a truce over the courtyard wall."

As he spoke Du Poizat had bent forward and begun to fish about in the bronze bowl, with its fragments of half-burnt paper. But Rougon soon twigged what he was about and looked up sharply. He had always been a trifle apprehensive of his former confederate, whose irregular white teeth suggested the jowl of a wolf cub. When years back they had worked together, Rougon's great preoccupation had always been never to let Du Poizat get hold of the least scrap of compromising material. Hence, now that he saw him trying to read charred fragments of documents, he hastened to toss a further handful of blazing sheets into the bowl. Du Poizat tumbled at once, but with a grin tried to gloss it over.

"Regular spring-cleaning, eh?" he remarked.

He took up a long pair of scissors and, using them as tongs, proceeded to re-ignite in the candle any sheets which went out, waving about any scrap that was too tightly folded to make it burn. He continued to stir the smouldering paper ash as if he had before him a bowl of punch. Glowing sparks floated up in the bowl and a bluish smoke began to blow in a steady stream towards the open window. Every now and again the

candle flame gave a flutter, then again burned very straight and erect.

"Look," Du Poizat began again with a cynical laugh, "just like a good church candle. And what a funeral service, oh, my dear fellow. There are corpses to be buried in all this ash!"

Rougon was on the point of making some rejoinder, when a new scuffle flared up in the ante-chamber. For the second time, Merle was trying to bar the door. When the voices rose considerably in volume, Rougon turned to Delestang.

"Do have a look and see what's going on," he said. "If I show myself, it'll be an invasion."

Cautiously, Delestang slipped out through the door, closing it again at once, but only, the very next instant, to poke his head in again and whisper:

"Kahn's here."

"Very well," said Rougon. "Let him in! But take care, only him!"

He also called Merle in, to repeat his instructions. No entry.

"My dear friend, you really will have to excuse me," he said, turning to M. Kahn, as soon as the commissioner had gone. "I am terribly busy. . . . There, sit yourself down next to Du Poizat. But you must keep still, or I shall have to turn you both out."

M. Kahn did not seem in the least disturbed by this unceremonious reception. He was well accustomed to Rougon's moods. He took an armchair and sat down beside Du Poizat, who was now lighting his second cigar.

"Phew!" he cried, "it's hot already. . . . I've just been round to your place. I thought you might still be at home."

Rougon offered no reply to this, and there was a silence, while he crumpled up some more papers and tossed them into a waste-paper basket he had drawn to his feet.

"I rather wanted to have a word with you," resumed M. Kahn.

"Fire away, fire away," said Rougon, "I'm listening."

But here the deputy seemed suddenly at last to be aware how upside-down the Premier's office was.

"Good gracious, what on earth are you doing?" he demanded. His acting of surprise was perfect. "Changing rooms?"

The tone was so nicely chosen that Delestang most thoughtfully interrupted what he was doing to find a copy of the *Moniteur* and place it before M. Kahn.

"What? Good Heavens!" cried M. Kahn, as soon as he had set eyes on the newspaper. "But I thought yesterday evening everything had been nicely settled. What a thunderbolt! . . . My dear friend! . . ."

He had risen to his feet and now, taking both Rougon's hands in his, he shook them demonstratively. Without a word, Rougon stared at him, his broad cheeks furrowed at each corner of the mouth by a deep, sarcastic furrow. Since Du Poizat seemed to be totally unaware of this scene, the suspicion flashed into his mind that these two had met already this morning. What confirmed that opinion was that M. Kahn too, for his part, had failed to show any surprise to find the Deux Sèvres Sub-Prefect there. Of course one had come straight here, while the other hurried round to Rougon's house in the *rue Marbeuf*, so that between them they might be sure not to miss him.

"Didn't you say you had something to tell me?" Rougon quietly reminded him.

"Forget it, my dear friend!" cried the deputy. "You have quite enough to bother you now. You don't think I'm going to add my troubles, do you, at a moment like this?"

"Oh, my dear Kahn, but please don't hesitate, say whatever you want."

"Very well, then. It's about my project. You know, that wretched railroad concession of mine. . . . I'm rather glad to see Du Poizat here, perhaps he can inform us on one point."

He proceeded at length to outline how far his project had got. It concerned a railway between Niort and Angers, a proposal on which he had been working for the past three years. The essential was that the line should run *via* Bressuire, where he owned some blast furnaces, the value of which would be doubled by it. Hitherto transport had been a problem and the enterprise was marking time. The eventual realization of the plan also offered great hopes of some very profitable fishing in troubled waters, so M. Kahn had been prodigiously active trying to get the concession, and Rougon had been lending him energetic support. Indeed, the concession had been on the point of being granted, when the Minister of the Interior, Count de Marsy, who was piqued at not being in the

scheme, but whose nose told him there were some fine pickings to be had—and who in any case was most anxious to serve Rougon a bad turn—used all his high-placed influence against it. With that effrontery which made him so dangerous a foe, he had even gone so far as to offer the concession to the head of the Western Railway Company, through the Minister of Public Works, and had noised it about that they were the only people who could make anything of such a branch line, the construction of which called for backing. Now M. Kahn saw ruination facing him. Rougon's fall was the last straw.

"Yesterday," he said, "I heard that one of the Western Company's engineers has been instructed to work out a new route—has any news of that come your way at all, Du Poizat?"

"It certainly has," replied the Sub-Prefect. "What's more, they've already begun work. . . . They are trying to avoid the elbow which you introduced to take the line through Bressuire. It would now run *via* Parthenay and Thouars."

M. Kahn made a gesture of despair.

"Purest spite," he muttered. "What harm would it do them to run the line close to my ironworks? . . . But I shall put up a fight! I am going to draw up a memorandum against their route at once. . . . I'll travel down to Bressuire with you, Du Poizat."

Du Poizat grinned. "No, don't count on that," he said. "Apparently, I'm going to resign my Sub-Prefecture."

M. Kahn slumped heavily into his chair, as if this was the last catastrophic blow. With both hands he scrubbed at his ruff of beard, his eyes fixed beseechingly on Rougon. Rougon had abandoned his files. Elbows on the desk, he was now all attention.

"If you ask my advice?" he said, at last, bluntly, "it is: lie low, my good friends, lie low, make it your aim to keep things marking time, and wait till we're in the saddle again. . . . Du Poizat is going to resign his prefecture now simply because if he did not he'd be kicked out within a fortnight. As for you, Kahn, write to the Emperor and do all you can purely to prevent the Western Company getting the concession. You in any case obviously won't get it, but like that, nobody will, so later on the field'll still be open to you."

When his two visitors shook their heads, he added, with still less ceremony:

"Well, that's all I can do for you. They've got me down."

You must give me time to get on my feet again. . . . Do I look downhearted? Of course I don't. Well, then, do something for me! Stop going about as if you were at my funeral. . . . As a matter of fact, I am delighted to get back to private life for a bit. At last I can get a little rest."

He took a deep breath, folded his arms and let his vast frame relax. M. Kahn now said no more about his concession, but assumed the unconcerned air of Du Poizat, striving to manifest a complete freedom of mind. Delestang had meanwhile begun on a fresh filing-cabinet. Ensconced beyond the armchairs, he made so little sound that one might have imagined it was only a family of mice at work. Creeping slowly forward over the red carpeting, the sun now cut off an angle of the desk with a brilliant glare which made the still flickering candle very pallid.

A heart to heart talk now began. As he resumed tying up his parcels of papers with string, Rougon assured them that politics did not really suit him. He grinned good-naturedly, and, as if tired, his eyelids sank down to conceal the gleam in his eyes. What he craved, he said, was a nice little piece of land to cultivate, fields he could plough at his own pleasure, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, horses, dogs. He would be absolute monarch of them all. He told them how, many years ago, at Plassans, while he was still only a little country lawyer, his great delight had been to don a rough shooting-jacket and wander about through the Seille gorge with a gun, potting, amongst other game, at eagles. He maintained that he was a peasant. His grandfather had still wielded the rustic mattock. Thus talking, he brought himself to playing the part of one surfeited with worldly ways. Power had become a boredom. He was going to spend the summer in the country. Never had he felt more lighthearted than this morning. Here, his powerful shoulders gave an immense heave, as if he were again shedding some tremendous burden.

"How much did you get here, as *Président du Conseil*? Eighty thousand francs, wasn't it?" M. Kahn enquired.

Rougon nodded assent.

"And all you'll have now is the thirty thousand due you as Senator?"

What did that matter to him? His living expenses were a mere fleabite, and he had no vices. This was quite true. Rougon did not gamble, he was not a womanizer, and food

meant nothing to him. Inevitably, he came back to his notion of having a farm and all the animals on it obeying him. That was his ideal, to brandish a riding-crop and issue orders, be the boss, both cleverer and stronger than them all. Gradually, he worked himself up, speaking of animals as he might have men. Crowds, he asserted, liked the stick. Shepherds never managed their flocks without throwing stones. As he spoke, he became transfigured, his thick lips swollen with scorn, his every feature exuding strength. In his clenched fist he brandished a file of papers and he might have been on the point of hurling it jointly at Kahn and Du Poizat's heads. The sudden burst of frenzy quite frightened them.

"No doubt about it," murmured Du Poizat, "the Emperor has certainly taken a very unwise step."

Just as suddenly, Rougon now calmed down. His face at once turned grey, and his body became flaccid, exhibiting all the sluggish ponderousness of one who is merely obese. He turned all at once to extravagant praise of the Emperor. There, he said, you had a powerful intellect, and a mind of incredible profundity. Du Poizat and M. Kahn exchanged quick glances, but Rougon only piled it on the more. He told them how devoted he was to Louis Napoleon. With great humility he asserted that he had always been proud to be a mere tool in the hands of Napoleon III. He ended up by making Du Poizat quite angry, for the latter was a quick-tempered fellow. The two began to wrangle. With bitterness Du Poizat referred to all that he and Rougon had done for the Empire between 1848 and 1851, in those days when they lodged at Mme. Mélanie Correur's place and were perpetually hungry. He went on to speak of those terrible days, particularly during the first year, days spent trudging through the muddy streets of Paris, canvassing supporters. Later, he said, they had risked their crowns a score of times. Was Rougon not the man who on December 2nd led the regiment which seized the Bourbon Palace? In all that, they were risking their necks, with a vengeance. Yet here they were today, sacrificed, victims of a mere Court intrigue!

Rougon, however, protested. He was no sacrifice. He was withdrawing for personal reasons, he said. Then, when at this Du Poizat got quite worked up and spoke of the Court crowd as "swine", Rougon was at last obliged to shut him up by bringing his fist down on the rosewood desk, which he did with such a

crashing blow that that article of furniture creaked at the joints.

"All that talk is very unwise," he said, calmly.

"You are going a little too far," murmured M. Kahn.

Here, standing very pale behind the line of armchairs, Delestang softly peeped out of the door, to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. But all he saw in the ante-room was Merle's upstanding silhouette, the man's back most discreetly towards the door. Rougon's blunt pronouncement had brought a flush to Du Poizat's cheeks, but it also restored him to his senses and, chewing impotently at his cigar, he now held his tongue.

"No doubt the Emperor has got bad advisers," Rougon resumed, after a brief silence. "I once took it upon myself to tell him so, but he only smiled. Indeed, he found it rather funny and said that his entourage was no worse than my own."

At this Du Poizat and M. Kahn laughed, though with some constraint, but they declared the Emperor's witticism delightful.

"However," Rougon continued, with special emphasis, "I repeat, I am merely satisfying my own whims by retiring. If anybody tries to pump you, as my friends, you had better insist—after all, it is the truth—that yesterday I was still in a position to withdraw my resignation. . . . You might also deny the gossip going the rounds about that Rodriguez business. Apparently the whole story is being turned into a regular novelette. Perhaps I did happen to disagree with the rest of the government about it all, and there were certainly some gentlemen on whose toes I trod, and all that did hasten my indignation. But I had reasons of longer standing, better-founded reasons, indeed, and for some time past have been resolved to relinquish the elevated position which I owed to the Emperor's favour."

All this haranguing of his friends Rougon accompanied by gesticulations with his right hand, an oratorical trick which he was wont to overdo when speaking in the Chamber. All these explanations, of course, were for public consumption, but, knowing their Rougon, M. Kahn and Du Poizat by wily replies did their best to learn the real truth. The great man (this was their private name for him) must be playing some tremendous trick. They drew the talk to politics in general. Rougon now poured scorn on parliamentarism. A parliament,

he said, was a "dung-heap of mediocrities". In his view even France's Legislative Body still enjoyed absurd liberties. There was far too much talk in it: France called for administration by a well designed bureaucratic apparatus, with the Emperor at the top and all the big public offices and the administrators who were under him, reduced to mere cogs. He outlined his system, puffing out his chest and laughing uproariously, full of scorn at the same time for the idiots who asked for strong governments.

"But with the Emperor at the top and everybody else down below," interrupted M. Kahn, "it's not very amusing for the Emperor, is it?"

"It is always open to anybody who is bored to withdraw, Rougon replied, calmly, adding with a smile: "then wait till it is entertaining again, and come back."

A lengthy silence ensued. M. Kahn rubbed away at his beard. Now he knew what he had wanted to know, and he was satisfied. He had guessed right, yesterday, in the Chamber, when he suggested that Rougon had realized that his stock had dropped generally at Court. To be able to make a fresh start, Rougon had met his fall from favour half-way, the Rogriguez affair offering a wonderful chance of doing so as the honest broker.

"Now tell me the gossip," said Rougon at last, to break another silence.

"I've only just got to Paris," replied Du Poizat. "All the same, just now, in a café, I heard a fellow with a decoration strongly approving of your resignation."

"Yesterday, Béjuin was very worked up," struck up M. Kahn. "Béjuin, of course, is very fond of you. He's rather dim, I know, but he is most reliable. . . . Even little La Rouquette showed up very well, in my opinion. He spoke of you in excellent terms."

The conversation thus ran on about one man and another. Without the least embarrassment, Rougon put his questions, forcing the deputy to provide him with a precise report. Willingly Kahn now furnished him with detailed notes on the attitude of the Legislative Body towards him.

"This afternoon," interrupted Du Poizat, to whom it was painful to have no information to give, "I shall take a stroll about town, and tomorrow morning, as soon as I'm up, I shall have a lot to report."

"By the way," cried M. Kahn with a laugh, "I almost forgot to tell you about de Combelot. . . . I really must say I never saw a man more put out. . . ."

But, seeing Rougon screw up his eyes, to draw his attention to Delestang's back, M. Kahn stopped short. Delestang had just climbed on to a chair to clear the top of a set of bookshelves on which newspapers were piled. M. de Combelot had married one of Delestang's sisters, and since Rougon's fall Delestang had been finding it rather irksome to be connected with a Court Chamberlain. This made him anxious to manifest how little he cared, so, turning round with a grin, he cried:

"Go on, why not? . . . de Combelot's a damn fool. There, now you've got it!"

This unhesitant disposal of a brother-in-law delighted the company. Seeing that his sally had come off, Delestang hastened to go on and pour ridicule on de Combelot's beard, that swart outcrop so notorious among the fair sex. Then *à propos* of nothing exactly, Delestang tossed a bundle of newspapers down to the floor and solemnly declared that one man's misfortune was another man's delight.

This truism brought the conversation back to Count de Marsy. Rougon was now engrossed in a portfolio, rummaging in every division of it. He let his friends have their little comfort, and they then proceeded to speak of de Marsy with all the fury which politicians do show when attacking an adversary. There followed a regular hail of outrageous charges, couched in the crudest of language, with true stories exaggerated to the point of falsehood. Du Poizat, who had known de Marsy in the old days, before the Second Empire, asserted that the man was then living on his mistress, a Baroness whose jewellery he consumed in three months. According to M. Kahn there was not a fishy piece of public business in all Paris in which de Marsy had not had a finger. Thus they egged each other on, raking out ever more pungent details. There was a certain mining venture regarding which de Marsy had pocketed a bribe of a million and a half. Last month he had put a house in Florence in the market, a trifle worth six hundred thousand francs, his part in a Moroccan Railway share deal. Finally, only last week, there had been the great *Egyptian Canals* enterprise, promoted by certain tools of his, the whole thing fizzling out in a first-class scandal, the shareholders

learning that not a spadeful of earth had been turned, though they had been pouring in money for two years. After this, the two men fell to attacking de Marsy personally. Despite all his fine airs, they strove to make the great figure of the adventurer out to be a very little one indeed—with sly references to years-old infections with certain diseases which would some day cost the man dear. They even descended to the point of attacking the collection of paintings that de Marsy was making.

Du Poizat summed up at last with the definition that de Marsy was a "first-class crook who happens to occupy the skin of a comic actor".

Slowly, Rougon now raised his head and gazed wide-eyed at the other two.

"That's done you a lot of good," he said. "Good gracious me, Marsy looks after number one, just as you've been trying to. . . . We are talking rather at cross purposes, I think. If I could ever ring the fellow's neck, I would gladly do so. But in spite of all you say, it remains true that Marsy is a very strong man. If it came up his back, he'd gulp you two down in one mouthful, let me warn you!"

With this, he rose from his chair. He was tired of sitting, and wanted to stretch his limbs. Yawning luxuriously, he added:

"And he would do it the more easily, may I remark, my dear fellows, since now I would not be able to stand between you."

"Ah, but if you wanted to," murmured Du Poizat, with a crafty grin, "you could cope with de Marsy all right. Why, there's documents here that he would pay a fine price for. . . There, on the floor, you've got the Lardenois file. That was a business in which he played a funny part. I can see from here a very interesting letter from him, I brought you it myself, at the time."

Rougon had crossed to the hearth to tip out the papers with which he had gradually packed the waste-paper basket. The bronze bowl was no longer sufficient.

"We annihilate, we don't just scratch," he said, with a scornful shrug of the shoulders. "Every man jack of us has written unwise letters that are now in other people's hands."

With these words, he took the letter in question, ignited it at the candle, then used it as a spill to set light to the pile of papers in the hearth. For a moment he squatted there, a bulky figure, supervising the burning documents, which tended

to spill out to the edge of the carpet. Heavy sheets of official paper twisted like roofing lead as they blackened, while notes and letters scrawled illegibly on flimsier scraps burned clear with little tongues of flame. But still, in the very heart of that glowing brazier, amid the confusion of sparks, there were charred fragments which remained intact and legible.

At this very instant the door was flung wide open and a laughing voice was heard:

"That's all right, Merle, I'll forgive you. . . . I'm one of the family here. Heavens, if you barred my way in here, I should merely have gone round through the Council Chamber."

It was M. d'Escorailles, whom Rougon had six months previously got in to the government offices as a probationer. On his arm he was leading pretty Mme. Bouchard, sparkling in a gay coloured spring frock.

"Oh no!" muttered Rougon. "Wonderful! Petticoats now!"

He did not leave the hearth at once, but squatted there for a moment longer, trying now to douse the blaze with the shovel, to save the carpet, but he looked up, his broad countenance scowling. M. d'Escorailles was not in the least put out. As they had crossed the threshold he and the young woman had straightened their faces, to appear suitably grave.

"My dear *Maitre*," he began, addressing Rougon by his legal honorific, "I've brought round a lady friend of yours who insisted on offering you her condolences. . . . We've just seen the news in the *Moniteur*. . . ."

"So you've seen the news in the *Moniteur*, have you?" Rougon ground out, when at last he decided to straighten his back. Only then he caught sight of a third party whom he had not noticed before. Blinking with astonishment, he cried:

"Why, if it isn't M. Bouchard!"

It was indeed the lady's husband. Silent and dignified, he had followed in on his wife's heels. He was sixty, white-haired, dull of eye. His whole countenance looked as if his quarter of a century of employ in the government service had eroded it. In response to Rougon's exclamation he did not utter a word, but, most intently seizing Rougon's hand, pumped it vigorously up and down three times.

"Hm," said Rougon, "it's certainly very kind of you all to come to see me, only you really are going to hinder me, you know. . . . But all right, make yourselves comfortable over there. . . . Du Poizat, let Madame have your chair, will you?"

Turning, he now found himself confronted by Colonel Jobelin.

"You too, Colonel!" he ejaculated.

The door had been left wide open and Merle had been unable to prevent the Colonel's entry, for he had followed up the stairs close on the heels of the Bouchards. By the hand he led his son, a big lout of fifteen, now a fifth-former at the *Louis-le-Grand Lycée*.

"I wanted to bring Auguste to see you," he said. "It is in misfortune that real friends are revealed. . . . Come, Auguste, offer M. Rougon your hand."

But Rougon had already rushed out into the ante-room, shouting:

"For Heaven's sake keep that door shut, Merle! What are you thinking of? I'll soon have all Paris in here."

Merle, unruffled, merely muttered:

"You see, Monsieur le Président, it's seeing you, Monsieur le Président."

Even as he spoke, the Commissioner was obliged to draw back to let the Charbonnells pass. They arrived on the tail of the others, one after the other, both out of breath, distressed, awe-stricken, and both talking at the same time.

"Just seen the *Moniteur*. . . . Oh, what bad news! How upset your poor mother will be! So are we! Look how it leaves us in the lurch!"

With a simplicity which the others lacked, the Charbonnells would have plunged at once into the details of their own worries, had not Rougon quickly shut them up. His next step was to slip a concealed catch under the door lock, muttering something about breaking that in now. Then, seeing that none of his friends showed any sign of being ready to go, he decided to resign himself to it and make an effort to complete his task despite the nine people now cluttering up the room. The work of clearing out personal papers had already turned the whole place into a shambles. There were files all over the floor, so that when they wanted to get to one of the window bays, the Colonel and M. Bouchard had to take great care not to tread on papers as they made their way across the room. There were now bundles of string-tied papers on every chair. Only Mme. Bouchard succeeded in finding a disengaged armchair. She thanked Du Poizat and M. Kahn with a smile for their courtesy, while M. d'Escorailles tried to find her a footstool,

falling back at last on a thick blue folder which was still stuffed with papers. Some desk drawers stacked in one corner afforded the Charbonnells the opportunity to squat down for a moment to get their breath back, while young Auguste found it all great fun and began to nose his way through the piles of box files, behind which it looked as if Delestang had tried to entrench himself, though at the moment he was busy raising clouds of dust merely by tossing down more newspapers from the top of the bookcase, which made Mme. Bouchard cough.

"You ought not to stay in all this dirt," Rougon observed, busily gutting the files that he had requested Delestang to leave alone.

But, blushing to her ear-tips because she had coughed, the young woman assured him that she was quite all right, the dust would not hurt her hat. The whole band of them now gushed their regrets to Rougon. There was no doubt about it, the Emperor was most heedless of the country's interests, if he was going to let himself be got round by people so little worthy of his confidence. France was suffering a great loss. But it was always the same: a great mind never failed to rally all the mediocrities against it.

"Régimes are always ungrateful," was M. Kahn's opinion.

"All the worse for them!" declared the Colonel. "Every blow struck at those who serve them well falls on their own heads."

But it was M. Kahn who had the last word. He turned to Rougon and said:

"When such a man as you falls, the country goes into mourning."

The band all found that perfect. It was most aptly put.

"Yes, yes," they agreed, "deep mourning!"

Struck by the blatancy of all this praise, Rougon raised his head. A light came into his grey cheeks. His whole countenance was lit by a restrained grin of satisfaction. He was as sensitive to flattery about this strength of his as any woman about her charms. This point-blank flattery just suited him. He puffed out his chest. Oh yes, he was monumental, he was, stone him with paving cobbles and he would stand up to it. At the same time, it became clear that his friends were all rather embarrassed by each other. They kept their eye one on another, each out to oust the other, yet striving to keep their voices low.

Now that the great man really did seem defeated, no time was to be lost getting him to say something favourable to their various causes. It was the Colonel who first tried his luck. He dived into one of the window openings. Rougon followed submissively, a box file in his hands.

"Have you thought of me?" the Colonel demanded, his voice cast low and an ingratiating smile on his face.

"I certainly have," said Rougon. "Your nomination as Commander was promised four days ago. Only of course you will realize that now I can say nothing definite. . . . I must confess that I fear my friends may suffer because of my fall from favour."

The Colonel's lips quivered with emotion. He stammered something about the need to make a fight for it. He would put up a fight himself. Then he swung sharply round on his heels and called Auguste. The young rascal was on all fours under the desk, ostensibly reading the labels on files, which enabled him with swimming eyes to peer up at Mme. Bouchard's dainty laced boots. He hurried now to his father's side.

"This is my youngster," the Colonel continued, still keeping his voice low. "You know, I shall have to find an opening for the little rogue one of these days. I count on you. I can't make up my mind whether it's to be the legal profession or the public service. . . . Shake M. Rougon's hand, Auguste, so your good friend may bear you in mind."

While this was going on, Mme. Bouchard, who had been biting her glove with impatience, signing with her eyes to M. d'Escorailles to follow her, left her chair and went to the left-hand window. Her husband was already there, his elbows on the railing, gazing at the scene outside. Across the way the huge Tuileries chestnuts' leaves quivered in the hot sunshine, and between the *Pont Royal* and the *Pont de la Concorde* endlessly poured the Seine's blue waters, flecked with light.

Suddenly Mme. Bouchard turned:

"Oh, M. Rougon," she cried, "do look!"

When Rougon expeditiously left the Colonel to obey this behest, Du Poizat, who had been following the young woman, withdrew discreetly and joined M. Kahn at the centre window.

"Look, that barge-load of bricks, it nearly sank just now!" affirmed Mme. Bouchard.

Courteously, Rougon remained at her side in the sunshine

till M. d'Escorailles, again tipped off by the young woman, said:

"M. Bouchard wants to resign from the service. We have brought him here for you to talk him out of it."

M. Bouchard now explained. Injustice, it seemed, always turned his gorge.

"Yes, M. Rougon, I began my career as a junior clerk in the Ministry of the Interior and I have risen to be an office head, without owing anything to anybody's favour or intervention. . . . I have been *chef de bureau* since 1847. Yet, I tell you, there has already five times been openings for divisional chiefs, four times under the Republic and once under the Empire, without the Minister's thinking of me, despite my claim to normal promotion. . . . And, now that you are no longer in office, to fulfil the promise you made me, I would rather resign altogether."

Rougon was obliged to pacify him. The post he wanted had still not been given to anybody else, and even if he failed to get it this time, it was only one lost opportunity and there would without question be another. Then he took Mme. Bouchard's hands in his and said some nice things to her, in a fatherly way. The *chef de bureau's* home was the first to which he had had the entrée when he first came to Paris. It was there that he had met the Colonel, who was a second cousin of M. Bouchard's. Later, when, at the age of fifty-four, M. Bouchard had inherited from his father and suddenly felt the desire to marry, Rougon had been Mme. Bouchard's witness. She had been an Adèle Desvignes, a well-brought-up young lady of a Rambouillet family of good standing. The *chef de bureau* had insisted on marrying a country lass, because irreproachable conduct meant much to him. Now, at the close of her fourth year of married life, Adèle, a fair-haired, sweet little thing, with slightly faded innocence in her blue eyes, had already reached her third lover.

"Come now, do please stop worrying so," said Rougon, still squeezing her little hands in his massive ones. "You know very well one is doing all one can for you. . . . In a day or two Jules will let you know where we've got."

He then took M. d'Escorailles aside, to tell him that that very morning he had written to his father, to reassure him. The young probationer should stick to his post, without worrying. The d'Escorailles were one of Plassans' oldest

families. In their native town they enjoyed great esteem. Thus Rougon, who had once shuffled past the old Marquis's house—Jules' father's—in down-at-heel footwear, now made it a point of pride to pull strings for the young fellow. Though the family made no attempt to stop Jules serving Louis Napoleon's Second Empire, their heart was however really in a cult of the legitimist pretender, the Comte de Chambord, "Henry V". They suffered Jules' career under the Second Empire as the sort of degradation to which the age had descended.

At the centre window, which they had opened, to be less likely to be overheard, M. Kahn and Du Poizat were talking, their eyes on the distant roofs of the Tuileries Palace, which loomed bluish in a haze of sunlight. They were feeling their way with each other, their rare words followed by lengthy silences, in which each measured the impact of what he had said. Rougon was too impetuous. He should never have lost his temper over that Rodriguez claim. That could so easily have been fixed. Then, gazing into space—as if talking to himself—M. Kahn murmured:

"A man knows when he's out, but what he doesn't know is whether he'll ever get back again."

Du Poizat pretended not to have heard this at all, and it was some time before he suddenly observed:

"True, Rougon's very tough."

At this pronouncement the deputy swung sharply round and, speaking very fast, said point-blank:

"The fact is, 'twixt you and me, I'm afraid for him. He's playing with fire. . . . Granted, we are his friends, there's no question of deserting him. All I want to say is that one can scarcely say that he has had much thought for us in it all. . . . Take myself, for instance, I am responsible for enormous interests. . . . And now he's gone and compromised them by his pigheaded whim. . . . What I mean is, he would have no call to be annoyed with me if I did knock on another door. Now, would he? For, after all's said and done, I am not the only one to suffer. There are my employees too."

"You will be obliged to knock on another door," Du Poizat agreed, with a smile.

Then, in a sudden burst of rage, the other man blurted out the truth of it.

"As if I could! . . . Damnation to him, he sets you at

loggerheads with everybody! Once you're in his band, you're labelled!"

The outburst over, M. Kahn sighed, and turned to look beyond the *Arc-de-Triomphe*, the grey stone mass of which showed above the green carpet of the *Champs-Élysées*. Then, quite calmly, he added:

"How can we help it? I myself am as stupidly loyal."

For the past few moments, the Colonel had been standing just behind them.

"Loyalty," he declared, in military fashion, "is the road of honour."

Du Poizat and M. Kahn stood away from each other, to make room for the Colonel, who ran on:

"From today on, Rougon is in our debt. He no longer belongs to himself alone."

This declaration enjoyed tremendous success. Very nicely put. Rougon no longer belonged to himself alone. And he ought to be told so, straight, so he knew what his duty was. All three now lowered their voices, making schemes and distributing hopes. Every now and then they glanced up and down the big room behind them to make sure none of Rougon's other friends held his attention too long.

The great man was now busily gathering files of papers together, while he chatted away with Mme. Bouchard, and in the corner, where so far they had been sitting in silent embarrassment, the Charbonnels began to argue. Twice they had made an attempt to get hold of Rougon, who had let first the Colonel, then that young woman, catch his attention. In the end, M. Charbonnel began to propel his wife towards Rougon.

"This morning," she stammered, "we had a letter from your mother. . . ."

Rougon did not let her finish, but at once led both husband and wife to the right-hand embrasure, once again relinquishing his files without much annoyance.

"We had a letter from your mother," Mme. Charbonnel repeated.

She was on the point of reading it out to him, when he took it from her and glanced swiftly through it. Former olive oil merchants in Plassans, the Charbonnels were protégés of Mme. Félicité, as everybody in the town called Rougon's mother. It was she who had sent them to him, *à propos* of a

submission which they had made to the government. A second cousin of theirs, named Chevassu, a lawyer of Faverolles, which was the principal town of the neighbouring department, had died, leaving a fortune of half a million francs to the *Sisters of the Holy Family*. Though they had never counted on getting anything in the will, when all at once the Charbonnells found themselves the heirs of a brother of Chevassu's who died, they at once challenged the legacy of the religious order, and as this community had applied to the government for authorization to accept the legacy, the Charbonnells had left their old Plassans home and rushed to Paris, to take up quarters in the *Hôtel du Perigord* in the *rue Jacob*, to be close at hand to pursue their own cause. And the case had been dragging on now for the past six months.

"We are desolate," sighed Mme. Charbonnel, while Rougon read the letter. "I had never wanted to hear talk of this claim. But M. Charbonnel would keep on saying that with you there it was so much money earned, you only had to say the word, for us to be half a million in pocket. . . . Isn't that so?"

She appealed to her husband. The former oil merchant nodded frantically.

"It was a nice little figure," the wife ran on. "One worth uprooting ourselves for. . . . Yes, indeed, we have uprooted ourselves. Would you believe it, M. Rougon, only yesterday the maid at our hotel refused to give us clean linen. And me with five presses full at Plassans!"

And she ran on bitterly, complaining of this Paris that she detested. They had come here for a week. After that they had hoped every week that went by to be gone and had never had anything sent up to them. Now it had dragged out so long that they had got quite stubborn. They eked out an existence in their hotel room, eating whatever the maid deigned to serve to them. They were without linen, almost without clothes. They had not even got a hair brush. Mme. Charbonnel did her hair with a broken comb. There were moments when they sat side by side on their little trunk and wept with weariness and exasperation.

"And such awful people come to the hotel," mumbled M. Charbonnel, his eyes wide-open with loathing. "There's a young man in the next room, for instance. . . . Such things we hear. . . ."

Rougon re-folded the letter.

"My mother," he said, "gives you the excellent advice to have patience. The most I can do is to counsel a little more tenacity. . . . Your case looks good to me. But you see, I am out of office, I have no right to promise you anything more."

"We leave Paris tomorrow," cried Mme. Charbonnel, in a burst of despair.

But no sooner had she uttered these desperate words than she turned as white as a sheet and M. Charbonnel had to support her. For some moments, they neither of them uttered a word. Their lips quivering, they looked at one another, and for two pins either would have burst into tears. They were broken people, it hurt them, as if they had suddenly seen those five hundred thousand francs slip away out of their reach.

Rougon continued cordially:

"You have a very good claim. Bishop Rochart—the Bishop of Faverolles—has come to Paris to support the Sisters' claim in person. Had he not put his spoke in, you would have won long since. But today, unfortunately, the clergy are very powerful. . . . However, I am leaving friends behind me in the service and hope I shall be able to do something without exposing myself. You have waited so long that, were you to leave tomorrow. . . ."

"We'll stay, we'll stay," Mme. Charbonnel stammered, quickly. "Oh, M. Rougon, what a lot that legacy will have cost us!"

Quickly, Rougon returned to his papers. Sweeping the room with his eye, he was relieved to see that there was nobody else there to drag him into a window embrasure. The whole band of them had now been satisfied, and in a few minutes he had made great strides with the task in hand. He was finding his own sort of amusement in all this, a brutal amusement, scornful of individuals, a sort of vengeance indeed, for all the tedium people made him endure. For the next quarter of an hour he held forth and was now monstrous to these friends whose tales he had heard with such condescension. He went so far and was so hard on pretty Mme. Bouchard that that young woman's eyes filled with tears, though she still contrived her smile. But being used to these sledge-hammer methods of his, the friends laughed. They had never been ~~better off than~~ when Rougon's fists belaboured them.

Then there came a discreet tap on the door.

"No, no," Rougon cried, to Delestang, who was getting up. "Don't open it! What sort of mockery of me is this? My head's throbbing already."

And then, hearing the door handle shaken more vigorously, he ground out:

"Oh, if I were staying on, how I would send that fool Merle flying."

The knocking ceased, but all at once, a small door in a corner of the *cabinet* opened, to allow the passage of an enormous blue skirt, which entered the room in little jerks, backwards. Very gaudy and with multiplicity of knotted ribbons, the skirt then halted for a moment, half inside, half out, without revealing anything further. Outside, a glib woman's voice was to be heard. "Monsieur Rougon!" she was calling. Then at last her face did appear. It was Mme. Correur, in a hat decked out with a bouquet of roses! Rougon had rushed forward, fists clenched, in a rage, but now he at once bowed to the inevitable and, going up to the newcomer, shook her hand most warmly.

"I was just asking Merle how he was getting on," declared Mme. Correur, and with tender glance she ogled the big lout of a Commissioner, smirking down on her. "And you, M. Rougon, are you pleased with him?"

"Oh, but of course," Rougon replied, cheerfully.

Merle maintained his simpleton's smile, while his glance feasted on Mme. Correur's plump shoulders and, puffing and preening, she straightened the kiss-curls at her temples.

"Now that's very gratifying, my lad," she resumed. "When I find a man a position, I do like everybody to be pleased. . . . Well, if ever you need any advice, always come to see me. Mornings, you know, between eight and nine. Well, be good!"

With this, she at last entered Rougon's *cabinet*.

"Nothing like an old soldier," she gushed to him. Once inside, Mme. Correur was not letting Rougon go for an instant. Pit-a-pat, she led him to the far side, by the end window, and proceeded to scold him for not coming himself to let her in. Had Merle not consented to take her round to the little door, why, she would have been outside these now! Heaven only knew how badly she needed to see Rougon! After all, he could hardly hand over the Premiership like that, without telling her at what point her various applications and

requests were. From her pocket she drew a very luxurious little notebook, bound in pink moiré.

"It wasn't till after lunch that I saw the *Moniteur*," she said. "I took a cab at once. . . . Now let's see, how does the case of Mme. Leturc stand?—The Captain's widow who wants a tobacco retail licence, I mean? I promised her it would be through next week. . . . And the case of that young lady. You know who I mean, Herminie Billecoq. She who was a pupil at *Saint Denis School*, and her betrayer agrees to marry if some decent soul will but be so good as to furnish the proper dowry. We did mention the Empress. . . . And all those other ladies, Mme. Chardon, Mme. Testanière, Mme. Jalaguier. They have been waiting for months."

Calmly, Rougon told her all she wanted to know, explained the delays, went into the most finicking details, though he did also intimate to Mme. Correuer that now she must count on him much less. This put her out badly. She so enjoyed doing somebody a service. Whatever would come of her, with all those ladies on her hands? And she ran on till she was talking about her own affairs, which Rougon was most familiar with. Once again she reminded him that she was a Martineau, of the Coulonges Martineaus, a good Vendéen family, in which the profession of notary went back uninterruptedly seven generations. When she was twenty-four, she had run away with a butcher's assistant, after a whole summer of secret meetings in a Dutch barn. Six months later, broken-hearted by the scandal, a shocking business which was still the talk of the district, her father had died. Since then she had lived in Paris, dead in the eyes of her family. She had written to her brother ten times. Now he headed the family firm of solicitors in his father's place. He had never replied to her. She blamed his silence on her sister-in-law, "one of those women always in tow with priests, it's she leads that ninny Martineau by the nose," she said. It was a fixed idea of Mme. Correuer's that some day, like Du Poizat, she should return to the home country, to show how respected and how valued she was.

"I wrote again a week ago," she murmured. "I bet that woman just throws my letters in the fire. . . . All the same, if anything were to happen to Martineau, she would simply have to throw the house open to me. They have no children, I should have business matters to settle. . . . He is fifteen years my senior. He's got the gout in his blood. Told me so himself."

Then, with sudden change of tone, she ran on:

"But no matter, let's not think of all that for the moment. . . . It's you we need to do something for just now, isn't it, Eugène? And so we shall, you'll see. You must be everything, so we stand a chance of being something. . . . Remember '51?"

Rougon smiled. And while she gave his hands a motherly squeeze, he bent to her ear and whispered:

"If you see Gilquin, do tell him to be discreet. A week or so ago, he took it on himself, you know, to give my name to bail him out when he got himself run in."

Mme. Correur promised to speak to Gilquin, an old tenant of hers of the days when Rougon lodged in the *Hotel Vanneau*. He was a bachelor who could on occasion be valuable. But he was also a most compromising brawler.

"Well, I'll be going," cried Mme. Correur, out loud, with a smile, as they reached the centre of the *cabinet*. "I have a cab waiting."

Nevertheless, she lingered on some minutes more. She was anxious to see them all go, now that she was going, and in order to precipitate the general withdrawal, even offered to give anybody a lift. It was the Colonel who accepted, and it was agreed that young Auguste should ride on the box with the driver.

There then began a grand distribution of handshakes. Rougon had taken up a position beside the wide-open door. As one after another said goodbye, they proffered a final word of regret. M. Kahn, Du Poizat and the Colonel even stretched out their heads to whisper it into his ear, so he might not forget it. The Charbonnells were already on the top stair and Mme. Correur was chatting with Merle at the back of the ante-room, while Mme. Bouchard, for whom both her husband and M. d'Escorailles were waiting, lingered with Rougon, very charming, very sweet, asking him when she might come to see him at his house in the *rue Marbeuf*, all alone, because she was such a silly when a lot of people were about. But when his ear caught that request, the Colonel came striding back, and he was followed by the others. There was a general re-entry.

"We'll all come and see you," cried the Colonel.

"You must not bury yourself," came several voices.

With a gesture, M. Kahn called for silence, and then pronounced the notorious words:

"You do not belong to yourself, you belong to your friends and to France."

At last they did go, and Rougon really could close the door again. He heaved a tremendous sigh of relief. Delestang, whom he had quite forgotten, emerged from behind the cluster of filing cabinets, in the shelter of which, conscientious friend, he had been finishing sorting the papers. He was rather proud of what he had done. He had achieved something practical, while the others just talked. It was thus with real delight that he heard the great man's very lively expression of gratitude. He was the only one who was of any help. He had a sense of order and a gift for method which would take him a long way. Rougon found quite a number of other flattering things to say, though without making it quite clear whether he was not perhaps being a little sarcastic. Then, turning about him and peering into all the corners, he concluded:

"Anyway, that's all done, I think, thanks to you. . . . It only remains to tell Merle to take these bundles round to my place."

He summoned the Commissioner and indicated his personal papers. To all Rougon's instructions, Merle still replied with the same:

"Yes, *Monsieur le Président*."

"Damnation, you blockhead," Rougon cried in the end, his nerves on edge. "For heaven's sake stop calling me *Président*, because I'm not your *Président* any longer!"

Merle bowed, took a step towards the door, hesitated, uncertain, then came back and said:

"There's a lady on horseback outside, sir, wants to see you. . . . She even said she'd ride her horse up the stairs, if they were only wide enough. . . . All she wants, sir, she says, is to shake you by the hand."

Rougon was clenching his fists, suspecting a piece of impudence, when Delestang, who had gone to peer out of a window on the landing, ran up, apparently very excited, and whispered:

"It's Lady Clorinda de Balbi!"

Rougon at once sent word that he was coming down. He took his hat. Delestang did the same. As he did so, Rougon quizzed him, suspicious and frowning. He was struck by Delestang's excited state.

"Ware the women, man," he said, once more.

When he was on the threshold, he turned back, once again to look at the office he had occupied. Broad daylight was

pouring in through the three wide-open windows, shedding its harsh illumination over the gutted files, the scattered drawers, the string-tied packages piled in the centre of the room. Deep in the hearth where he had piled handfuls of paper and burned them was a little shovelful of black ash.

When Rougon closed the door, the candle, forgotten on the corner of the desk, was guttering down and then the sharp click of the glass candle-drip as it snapped suddenly broke the silence of the now vacant apartment.

CHAPTER THREE

IT was in the afternoon, between three and four, that Rougon sometimes called on Countess de Balbi. He treated her as a neighbour, and would stroll round to her house, which was not large, but situated on the *Champs Elysées* Avenue itself, a few yards only from where the *rue Marbeuf* branches off. As a matter of fact, the Countess was rarely there, and when she did happen to be at home, would be in bed, and Rougon would be told that "the Countess begged to be excused". However, the fact that the Countess was confined to her room never prevented the hall of that house from resounding with the din of noisy callers, or doors banging loudly on one floor or another. The Countess's daughter, Clorinda, always had visitors, whom she used to receive in an upstairs room which ran the length of the house, a sort of studio room, with enormous bay windows giving on to the Avenue.

For nearly three months, with his lack of concern for the fair sex, Rougon had tended to be blind and deaf to all the approaches that both these ladies had made to him after they had first contrived an introduction at a Foreign Ministry ball. He came upon them everywhere, invariably exchanging the same winsome smiles, the mother saying little, but the daughter talking loudly and giving him penetrating glances. He however remained adamant, avoiding them, closing his eyes, not to see them, declining invitations addressed to him, till at last they forced themselves on his attention, pursuing him even into the *rue Marbeuf*, with Clorinda taking it into her head to pass by and call when out riding in the Park. After that he actually made some enquiries as to who they were, before risking calling.

The Italian Legation had very favourable things to say of them. A Count de Balbi, now departed this life, was no invention, and the Countess was in constant contact with Court circles in Turin. Last year, moreover, the daughter had been all but betrothed to a minor German princeling. But the Duchess of Sanquirino, of whom he next enquired, had quite a different

story. By her Rougon was assured that Clorinda had been born two years after the Count's demise. There were also rather tangled stories of the de Balbis, both husband and wife, having been involved in numerous scandals. Both had kicked over the traces. There had been a French divorce, then an Italian reconciliation, which had resulted in their living together in a sort of concubinage. A young Embassy attaché who was extremely well informed about all happenings at the Court of King Victor Emmanuel, was even more precise. According to him, if the Countess still had an influence at Turin, she owed it all to a former liaison with a certain very highly placed person there. The attaché also hinted that the Countess would never have left Turin had there not been a big scandal about which he was unable to say any more.

By this time, Rougon's enquiries had excited his interest, and he even went to the Paris prefecture. There, however, he obtained no definite information. The files relating to these two Italian ladies merely indicated that despite lack of evidence that they had any real financial standing, they lived lavishly. They themselves spoke of properties in Piedmont. In fact, there were sometimes sudden gaps in their high living. Then all at once they would suddenly vanish from the scene, only soon after to reappear with renewed splendour. In short, nothing was known about them; people preferred not to know. They were seen in the best circles, and their house in Paris was accepted as neutral ground, where, because she could be regarded as a sort of exotic blossom, Clorinda's extravagances were tolerated. Rougon decided he would call on the ladies.

At his third visit the great man's curiosity was greatly increased. He was of an unimpressible nature, slow to awaken. What first attracted him in Clorinda was precisely that quality of the unknown, of having a great deal in her past, and a set notion about the future, which he thought he could decipher in her large, youthful goddess eyes. Frightful things were related—a first attachment to a coachman, then a deal with a banker, said to have paid up for the young lady's pretended virginity by the gift of this little house on the Avenue. On the other hand, there were moments when she seemed such a child that he doubted those stories. He would get the truth from her, himself, and came back to her to have an assurance from this strange girl's own lips. Clorinda had become an intriguing enigma which finally began to engage

his attention quite as much as any ticklish question-musician, politics. He had lived his life so far scornful of the fact that his first attraction was certainly the most intricate mechanism one could imagine.

The very next day after that on which Clé in formal cantered round on her hired hack to offer him a sympathy at the main entrance to the governor Viscardi, all Rougon went round to call, which, indeed, gravely insisted he should do, telling him she wanted Venetian him something which would take his mind on the point of thoughts. Laughingly, he called her "little wench" to him seeking distraction at her place, titillated by her monies. Since stirred up, particularly as he was still trying to seduce Rougon and she was, and was as far from a solution as he had mired himself in. Turning from the *rue Marbeuf* into the *avenue*.

Avenue, he glanced down the *rue Colisée* opposite, at an instant mansion. More than once he thought he had compromised worthy peering out of his study through the prise by the Venetian blind at Clorinda's windows, which were eaked in her there across the Avenue. But today the slats told herself. Delestang must have gone down to his model farm, usually did, early that morning.

The front door of the Balbi dwelling was always open. and at the foot of the stairs Rougon was met by present my woman with unkempt hair, in a tattered yellow frock which he had ing an orange just as if it were an apple.

"Antonia, is your mistress at home?" he demanded her gilded

Her mouth full, the girl made no reply, merely head vigorously and laughed. Her mouth was not the other orange juice, and she screwed up her beady eyes. Hair. General just like two blots of ink on her dark swarthy skin. Cal refugees

Accustomed now to the ramshackle service in the house. They Rougon made his way up the stairs. Half-way, he went to the a big lout of a man-servant, whose long black bearing at her the appearance of an Italian bandit. The man stared only in sively, and made no attempt to let the visitor pass, even baluster side. On the first floor landing, Rougon knocked into three of the doors open. The left-hand one was the way, Clorinda's bedroom. He was inquisitive enough to peep at that. Though it was four o'clock, the room was still not dark. To screen in front of the bed half hid the trailing bed-clothes. Over it yesterday's mud-bespattered petticoats had been lying,

story. By the window on the floor, there was a wash-
 two years of soapy water while the household cat, a grey
 tangled stoically asleep nestling in a heap of garments.
 been involved usually spent her time on the second floor, in the
 traces. There which she had turned first into studio, then
 reconciliation, smoking room, hothouse and summer drawing-
 sort of concubage mounted the stairs a mingled hubbub of
 extremely well its laughter and crashing furniture grew louder.
 King Victor. At the door he realized that the wheezy piano was
 to him, if the clock chimed. A man was singing. He knocked twice,
 owed it all to a response, then decided to go straight in.
 person there. "The bravo, there he is!" cried Clorinda, clapping
 never have left it

which he was sure it usually was to disconcert him, Rougon

By this time, in the doorway for some instants, uncertain what
 and he even went. It was the Italian Minister, Count de Rusconi,
 obtained no doubt, which he was banging frantically in an effort
 two Italian substantial sounds out of it. He was a handsome,
 evidence that man, who could at times be a serious diplomatist.
 lavishly. The middle of the room was La Rouquette, waltzing
 In fact, there, the back of which he was clutching with mock
 Then all at once his arms. So carried away was this worthy member
 only soon after legislative body by the dance that he had by now
 nothing was known with the chairs he had bumped against and
 They were seen. To complete the picture, in the harsh light shed
 accepted as new windows, opposite a young fellow who was making
 regarded as a sketch of her on a white canvas, was Clorinda
 were tolerated, was standing on the centre of a table, posing as

At his third dress. Her thighs were bare, her arms and her
 increased. He saw, she was all bareness, but perfectly uncon-
 awoken. What a sofa, their legs crossed, sat three very solemn
 that quality of smoking fat cigars and looking on with utter
 and a set note

decipher in "don't move!" cried de Rusconi, seeing Clorinda
 were related jump down from her table. "I'll do the intro-
 with a bar

pretended to lead Rougon into the room. As they came to M. La
 Avenue. Clorinda, who had now flopped breathless into an armchair,
 seemed to go on, smoothly:

get the idea is M. La Rouquette, whom I think you have met
 an ass. A future Minister. . . ." Then, crossing the room to the
 become, he continued:

"My secretary, M. Luigi Pozzo—diplomatist, musician, admirer."

He quite forgot the three gentlemen on the sofa. Then, noticing them, as he turned round, he suddenly abandoned his bantering tone, bowed towards the trio, and in formal tones murmured:

"Signor Brambilla, Signor Staderino, Signor Viscardi, all three political refugees."

Without abandoning their cigars, the three Venetian gentlemen bowed to Rougon. The Count was on the point of resuming at the piano when Clorinda called sharply to him and charged him with being a bad master of ceremonies. Since de Rusconi had forgotten this, she now indicated Rougon and without ceremony, but with a particularly admiring timbre in her voice, introduced him: "M. Eugène Rougon."

The Venetian gentlemen bowed again. For an instant Rougon had been apprehensive of a rather compromising witticism at his expense, but he was taken by surprise by the sudden tact and dignity with which, though half naked in her muslin costume, that tall young lady had acquitted herself. Sitting down, he enquired after the Countess, as he usually did, for he invariably made the pretence of having called only to see Clorinda's mother. He thought this more seemly.

"It would have given me much pleasure to present my compliments," he added, following the formula which he had adopted for this situation.

"But Mummy is here!" cried Clorinda, and with her gilded bow, she indicated a corner of the room.

There, indeed, was the Countess, hidden behind the other furniture. She was engulfed in an enormous armchair. General astonishment ensued. Apparently the three political refugees had been equally unaware of the Countess's presence. They at once rose to their feet and bowed. Rougon went to the Countess, and, after shaking her hand, remained standing at her side, while she continued to lie there, responding only in monosyllables, on her lips that smile which never left her, even when she was in pain. Gradually, however, she sank back into her usual worried silence, from time to time glancing sideways, to watch the streams of traffic in the Avenue. No doubt that was why she had come to lie down in this room. It was just to see people passing. Rougon moved away.

Meanwhile, de Rusconi had resumed his place at the piano,

and was picking out a tune, strumming lightly and singing some Italian words softly to himself. M. La Rouquette fanned himself with his handkerchief. With tremendous gravity Clorinda had resumed her pose. In the hush which had suddenly been established Rougon wandered slowly up and down the studio, examining the walls. The room was cluttered with an astonishing medley of things. A multitude of chairs, a bureau, a chest, and a number of tables had all been pushed into the centre, forming a maze of narrow gangways between them. At one end were some hot-house plants, stacked away, piled one on the other, dying, their green palm leaves drooping and half faded already, while at the other end loomed a big mass of clay, now quite dry, in which could still be distinguished the crumbling arms and legs of a statue that Clorinda had begun one day when she was bitten by the sudden whim of being an artist. Thus, for all its vastness, the only free area this long room offered was a small space opposite one of the window embrasures, a square patch constituting a sort of separate little drawing-room, formed by two sofas and three armchairs which did not match.

‘You may smoke,’ she remarked to Rougon.

He thanked her, but did not light up. Without turning her head, she called out to de Rusconi to roll her a cigarette.

“There should be some tobacco right there,” she said, “under your very nose, on the piano!”

While the Italian Minister was rolling the cigarette, a new silence ensued, and Rougon, rather piqued to find so many people there, was on the point of taking his hat, when he thought better of it. Instead, he went across to Clorinda and, looking up at her with a smile, said:

“I thought you asked me to call so that you could show me something.”

She however was so solemnly engrossed in her posing that she did not answer at once. Indeed, he had to repeat the question:

“What is it, then, that you wanted to show me?”

“Myself!” she said.

This declaration she made in a commanding tone, but without moving a limb, rigid on the table in her goddess pose. Her gravity imparted itself to Rougon. Drawing back a pace, he contemplated her. There was no gainsaying it, she was superb, with that pure profile of hers, that supple neck, that

graceful sweep from neck to shoulders. Above all, she possessed that most queenly beauty, a lovely bosom. Her rounded limbs, too, had all the gleam of marble. Thrusting forward, her left hip carried her body slightly at an angle, and she held her right arm aloft, so that from arm-pit to heels was one uninterrupted line, powerful and flexible, incurving at the waist, flowing freely out over the buttock. Her other hand was resting on her bow and, indifferent to her nakedness, she radiated all the tranquil strength of the ancient goddess of the hunt, scornful of the love of men, a cold, haughty, immortal goddess indeed.

"Very nice, very nice," murmured Rougon, not knowing what else he could say.

The truth was that she embarrassed him by her statuesque stillness. She seemed so victorious, so sure of being classically lovely that, had he dared, he would have criticized her as if she really were a thing of marble, some of the salient features of which offended his bourgeois eyes. He would have preferred a smaller waist, haunches less broad, a higher bosom. A moment later he was suddenly overcome by a violent masculine desire—to fondle her calves. He had to draw back from her, not to give way to the impulse.

"Have you seen enough?" Clorinda asked him, still deadly serious and grave. "Just a moment, here's something else."

In an instant she was Diana no longer. Dropping her bow, she became Venus. Her hands behind her head, laced in the coils of her hair, her bosom now half leaning back, raising her nipples, with lips half-opened she gazed smiling away from him. Her countenance was flooded with sunshine. She seemed smaller in the body now, but her limbs were fuller, and seemed all gilded with a quivering of desire, which seemed to shed a vibrant warm light over her satiny skin. She seemed to nestle there, offering herself, making herself desirable, a submissive mistress, longing to be taken in an embrace which would blot out all else.

Without for a moment abandoning their gloomy, conspiratorial rigour, M. Brambilla, M. Staderino and M. Viscardi all three uttered cries of "*Brava!*" and gravely applauded. M. La Rouquette exploded in a burst of enthusiasm, while, at last coming to the table to give this girl her cigarette, Count de Rusconi lingered there, his eyes misty with adoration, swaying his head lightly to and fro as if thereby to mark the pulsation of his wonderment.

Rougon made no comment, but clasped his hands so violently that the finger-joints cracked. A faint shudder ran right through him, from the nape of his neck to his heels. This settled the matter, he would stay, and he proceeded to make himself comfortable in an armchair. She however had already resumed her stalwart, untrammelled pose. There she stood, puffing at her cigarette and grinning broadly, with a rather scornful twist to her lips. She told him that she would have loved to be on the stage, in melodrama, that is to say. She could have depicted anything, she said, rage, sentiment, modesty, terror. And now by her mere posture and the play of her features, she was one emotion after the other. Then, all at once, she cried:

"M. Rougon, would you like me to do you, when you are addressing the Chamber?"

At once she expanded, puffing herself out, with stertorous breathing, then thrust out her clenched fists, all with a mimicry so droll and also so faithful a caricature, that everybody was breathless. Rougon laughed like a boy. She was adorable, both very clever and very disturbing.

"Clorinda, Clorinda!" Luigi was now muttering, and he began to tap the easel with his hand-rest.

She kept moving, he said, so that he could not work. He had by now finished his charcoal outline, and was laying thin patches of colour on the canvas with the laboriousness of a student. He retained his gravity amid all the laughter, with blazing eyes on the girl, and menacing glances for these men with whom she kept exchanging witticisms. It was he who had had the idea of painting her in this costume of *Diana the Huntress*, which had been the talk of Paris ever since the last Legation Ball. On the grounds of being born in the same street of Florence, he claimed to be her cousin.

"Clorinda!" he repeated, angrily.

"Luigi's quite right," she suddenly agreed. "You are behaving very badly, gentlemen, making such a disturbance. . . . Let us get back to work."

Once again she froze in her Olympian pose, and turned into a lovely marble statue. The gentlemen assumed such immobile faces that they might have been riveted in place. Only M. La Rouquette ventured a discreet movement, drumming nervily with his finger-tips on the arm of his chair. Rougon lay back and contemplated Clorinda, but more and

more dreamily as a reverie in which she gradually monopolized all the space took possession of him. What a strange piece of mechanism a woman was! It had never before occurred to him even to think about it, but he was now beginning to glimpse astonishing complexities. At one moment he was very sharply aware of the power in those bare shoulders. They were capable of upsetting the whole world. Thus by degrees Clorinda preoccupied all his confused field of vision, till like a giant statue she filled the whole window embrasure. Then, snapping his eyes sharply, he brought her down again to a figure of smaller dimensions than his own, standing on a table, and he was able to smile. Of course, had he wanted to, he could have spanked her like a child. He was astonished that she could ever have frightened him at all.

Meanwhile the murmur of subdued voices had arisen at the other end of the room. From sheer habit, Rougon gave ear, but all he could distinguish at first was a rapid murmur of Italian. Count de Rusconi had slipped round behind that confusion of furniture and now, with one hand on the back of the Countess's armchair, was apparently telling her some story which involved lengthy details. The Countess did no more than nod assent from time to time, till at something he said she suddenly made a violent sign of dissent. De Rusconi then bent still lower, and in his sing-song voice tried to reassure her, babbling away just like a bird twittering. But in the end, thanks to his command of *Provençal*, Rougon did manage to catch something of what was said, enough to worry him.

"Mummy," suddenly cried Clorinda, "did you show the Count the telegram which came last night?"

"Was there a telegram?" the Count demanded, out loud.

The Countess had drawn a bundle of letters from her pocket, and sorted through it for a considerable time, finally handing the Italian minister a very crumpled telegram. The moment he had digested it he made a gesture at once of astonishment and annoyance.

"What?" he cried, in French, oblivious of who was present, "you already knew this yesterday? But I did not hear till this morning!"

At this, Clorinda laughed uproariously, which made de Rusconi really angry.

"But the Countess let me tell her the whole long story as if she did not know a thing!" cried de Rusconi. "Very well, if

this is where the Legation is situated now, I shall come round daily to run through your correspondence."

Countess de Balbi smiled. Rummaging again in her bundle of letters, she selected a second sheet of paper, which she had him read. This time he seemed very pleased, the *sotto voce* conversation was resumed, and the Count again had that deferential smile. Withdrawing at last, he kissed the Countess's hand.

"That's all the serious business over," he murmured, and resumed his seat at the piano.

He began to hammer out a dashing rondo much in fashion that year, then, suddenly catching sight of a clock, snatched at his hat.

"You're not going?" Clorinda asked.

Beckoning him over, she leant on his shoulder, to whisper in his ear. He laughed and shook his head, then murmured:

"Jolly good, jolly good. . . I'll write and tell 'em that."

Bowing to the company, Count de Rusconi left, whereupon, with fresh taps of his hand-rest, Luigi brought Clorinda from her crouching position back to the proper stance. No doubt at last the stream of carriages down the Avenue had begun to bore the Countess. The moment she lost sight of de Rusconi's carriage as it vanished amid all the landaus returning from the Bois de Boulogne, she plucked at a bell-rope behind her. It was that big lout of a valet with the physiognomy of a bandit who entered, leaving the door wide open behind him. Leaning all her weight on the man's arm, the Countess slowly progressed down the room between the gentlemen who stood bowing on either side, which she smilingly acknowledged. Reaching the threshold at last, she turned back, to tell Clorinda that she was going to lie down for a little while, she had one of her migraines.

"Flaminio," Clorinda cried, to the valet, "fetch a bed-warmer to put at Mother's feet, will you?"

The three political refugees did not sit down again. For a few moments they stood there, all in a row, chewing the butt-ends of their cigars. Then, all three with equal delicacy and precision, they tossed the remains of these away in the corner, behind the pile of modelling clay, and one after another filed past Clorinda and out of the room.

"Heavens!" M. La Rouquette was saying, in the course of the conversation he had begun with Rougon, "of course I

know how very important this sugar question is, it concerns a whole section of France's industries. The misfortune is that there is nobody at all in the Chamber who seems to have given the matter serious study."

Rougon, whom he was boring, limited his replies to little nods. But the young deputy drew in closer. Lending his baby features a sudden gravity, he went on:

"You see, I happen to have an uncle in sugar. Owns one of the most flourishing refineries in Marseilles. . . . Well, I recently spent three months with him, and took notes, a lot of notes, too, and chatted with the men, in short, I familiarized myself with it all. . . . As you may imagine, I rather wanted to speak in the Chamber on the subject. . . ."

He was acting a part for Rougon's benefit, taking enormous trouble to entertain the great man on those things only which he thought ought to interest him. He was altogether most anxious to present himself in the light of a serious man of politics.

"And didn't you speak?" interrupted Clorinda, whom the continued presence of M. La Rouquette now seemed to annoy.

"No, I did not speak," La Rouquette resumed, speaking still more slowly. "I thought I should not do so. . . . At the last moment I was afraid my figures might not be quite accurate."

Looking him keenly in the face, Rougon now solemnly put a question:

"Do you know how many lumps of sugar are used daily at the Café Anglais?" he asked.

For a moment La Rouquette was taken off his guard and stared. Then, bursting out laughing, he cried:

"Very pretty, very pretty! I get you. You are pulling my leg, aren't you? . . . But that, you see is a question of sugar consumption, I was talking about sugar production. . . . Very pretty, though! May I use your *mot* on somebody else?"

He bounced up and down in his deep armchair with real pleasure. His cheeks turned quite pink. He was at ease again, trying to make more conversation. Now, however, it was Clorinda who attacked him—about women. The day before yesterday, she said, she had seen him at the *Variété Theatre* with a terribly ugly little blondie as touzle-headed as a poodle bitch. At first, La Rouquette denied it, but in the end Clorinda's savage treatment of the "little poodle" angered him and, forgetting himself, he took up the lady's defence, said

she was a very respectable person indeed, and far from being such a sight, either. He began to expatiate on her hair, even her legs. Clorinda now became quite spiteful, till M. La Rouquette cried:

"Well, whatever you like to say, I have to be going, she is expecting me."

When at last he closed the door behind him, she clapped her hands in triumph.

"Well, that's got rid of him, and good riddance too," she asserted.

Leaping nimbly down from the table, she ran to Rougon and held out both hands to him, all tenderness, saying how upset she was that he had not found her alone, what a job she had had getting rid of them all, people never seemed to understand, really they didn't. What a fool La Rouquette was with his sugar manufactures! But now at last perhaps they would not be disturbed any longer and could talk. There must be so many things she had to tell him! As she babbled on, she led him to a sofa, and he had sat down, still with her hands in his, when Luigi again began irritably tapping his hand-rest, with many irritated remonstrations of: "*Clorinda, Clorinda!*" till, slipping away from Rougon, she crossed the room, to lean over the painter's shoulder most caressingly. Oh! how lovely the painting was so far! It was coming along splendidly, wasn't it? But she really was just a little tired. Yes, she must have quarter of an hour's rest. Couldn't he be getting on with her costume? She need not pose for the costume, need she? Luigi shot furious glances at Rougon and went on muttering spitefully, till, knitting her eyebrows, though still smiling, Clorinda subjected him to a quick volley of Italian. He was silent at once and resumed his work, painting in thinly.

"I am not fibbing," she ran on, returning to sit down beside Rougon on the sofa, "I've got pins and needles in my left leg."

She began to pummel her leg, to encourage the circulation, she explained. Through the muslin her knees showed pinkish. All this time she had quite forgotten her state of undress. She leant gravely towards Rougon, till her shoulder was rubbing against the rough cloth of his coat, when all at once, coming up against a button, a shudder seized her bosom. Scarlet, she stared aghast at Rougon, then swiftly ran and, taking a length of black lace, enveloped herself in that.

"I'm really rather chilly," she said, pulling up an armchair

opposite Rougon, to sit down now in that. All that showed outside the lace after this transformation were her hands. She knotted the lace at her throat, to form a huge neckerchief, in which she buried her chin. Thus enwrapped, her bosom completely buried, she was black all over, and her countenance itself seemed pale and grave again.

"Well, now tell me what happened to you?" she said. "I want to know everything."

With the frank curiosity of a daughter, she interrogated him on his fall from power. She was a foreigner, she said, and she made him go three times over details which she maintained she did not understand. From time to time she interrupted with an Italian exclamation and in her black eyes he could see just how his account of it all moved her. Why had he quarrelled with the Emperor? However had he found it possible to give up so eminent a position? Who then were his enemies, that he should have let himself be so defeated? And when he hesitated, and she forced him into making some admission which he was loth to make, there was such affectionate frankness in her eyes that he gave way and told her everything. Soon she no doubt knew all she wanted, but she still put other questions, questions very far removed from the subject, strange questions, which surprised Rougon. At last, however, she folded her hands and was silent, her eyes closed, and sat deep in thought.

"Well?" he asked, with a smile.

"Nothing," she murmured. "It all hurts me."

He was touched. He would have taken her hands again, but she buried them in the lace wrap. The silence continued. After two long minutes, she opened her eyes wide again.

"Well, have you any plans?" she asked.

He examined her attentively. A suspicion had crossed his mind. But in this instant she was so lovable, lying back at full length, deep in the armchair, in a languishing pose, as if her "dear friend's" worries had worn her out, that he paid no attention to the slight chill which he felt at his back.

She now heaped flattery on him. Of course he would not be outside for long, he would be master again some day. She was sure that he had great ideas, as she had confidence in his star. It was written on his forehead. Why ever did he not make her his regular *confidente*. She was so discreet. She would be so happy to play a part in his future. Intoxicated now, and trying again to catch hold of those little hands buried deep in lace,

Rougon went on talking, talking interminably, till he had spilled it all, his hopes and his certainty. Though she examined him carefully point by point, probing his brain, she made no attempt to hurry him, merely let him talk, sitting perfectly passive herself, not to do anything to halt him. She weighed up those broad shoulders, that powerful chest. No doubt about it, he was massive. Powerfully built though she was herself, he could have swung her over his shoulders with a mere flick of the wrist and without turning a hair carried her off, bearing her to whatever heights she willed.

She stood up, spread her arms wide and let the lace wrap slither from her, till there she was again, more naked even than before, her breasts, her whole torso thrusting out of the muslin. She did this with such a loving, feline movement that she seemed to leap from her corsage like water from a rock, offering him a fleeting vision which was at once a reward and a gage for the future. What was more, was it not clearly the wrap that had slipped from her, for she was already drawing it back and knotting it still more closely.

"Sh!" she whispered, "Luigi's scolding."

Running now to the painter she bent over him again, to tell him something, whispering in his ear, very quickly. The moment her vibrant presence left him, Rougon rubbed his hands fiercely together. He felt an exasperation, almost annoyance. She did have an extraordinary surface effect on him. He cursed her for it, too. He could not have been a bigger ninny when he was twenty. She had just got everything out of him as if he were a child! To think that for the past two months it had been he who was trying to make her talk, yet never got any more out of her than an occasional peal of laughter. Yet all she had needed to do was to withhold her little paws from him on one occasion and he at once so lost control of himself that he babbled out everything, just to be able to have those hands in his again. Now it was beginning to be clear to him that she was out to win him, but not yet quite sure whether he was still worth going on with.

He smiled, the smile of a strong man. Whenever he wished, he would break her. Was it not she who had started it all? Shabby thoughts entered his mind, a scheme of seduction in which, after having bested her, he would put her just where he wanted. Really, it was out of the question for him to make a fool of himself with a big hussy who showed him her bosom like

that, though he was not at all sure that the lace wrap had not indeed slipped off accidentally.

"Tell me," she said, suddenly, going up to him again, "would you say my eyes were grey?"

He stood up and examined them at close range. Not a shade dimmed their limpid calm. But when he stretched out his hands, she smacked them sharply. No need to touch. She was very frigid now. She buried herself in her wrap, with a modesty which now took alarm at the slightest gap. In vain he laughed and teased her, pretending he would use force, she wrapped herself still closer, uttering little cries every time he so much as touched the fringe of the lace. Nor would she sit down again.

"I would rather move about a bit," she said. "It will take the stiffness out of my legs."

So he accompanied her, and they walked together, up and down the long room. He now tried to get her to answer his questions. As a rule she did not answer any enquiry, but now she babbled away, with sudden gaps, interrupting herself with exclamations, starting stories which she never finished. When at last he put penetrating questions about a fortnight's absence together with her mother, the previous month, she replied with an endless string of little anecdotes about their travels. She had been everywhere, in England, in Spain, in Germany, she had seen everything. There followed a stream of childish little comments on food and fashions and the weather here or there. She put herself into some of the stories she told, together with known personalities. She even named them, and Rougon was all ears, thinking she might at last let something out. But the stories either turned into the childish or were never finished, and he learned no more today than he had ever learned before. On her countenance all the time she wore that same mask of a smile and despite her expansive chatter she remained utterly inscrutable. Completely baffled as he was by amazing scraps of information, some of which contradicted others, Rougon in the end simply could not tell whether what he had beside him was a little girl of twelve, innocent to the point of simple-mindedness, or a very clever woman who had by great cleverness come full circle back to childlike innocence.

She now broke off the story of an adventure she had had in a small Spanish town—all about the gallantry of a fellow traveller whose bed she had had to accept, while he slept on a chair.

"You should keep right away from the Palace," she cried, *à propos* of nothing. "Make the Emperor regret you!"

"I thank you, Mademoiselle Machiavelli," he replied, with a laugh.

She laughed more heartily even than he did, but none the less continued with good advice, but when, as if playfully, he made a move as if to take her arms, she was quite angry and protested that they should be unable to have a couple of minutes serious talk together. Oh, if only she had been born a man, how well she would have known how to forge her path. Men had so little sense.

"Be sensible," she resumed, suddenly sitting down on the edge of the table, while Rougon stood facing her, "tell me something about your friends."

At this point, Luigi, who all this time had not taken his eyes off her, suddenly closed his paint-box with a loud bang.

"I'm going," he cried.

But Clorinda ran to the door and brought him back, assuring him that she really would pose for him again today. Apparently she was afraid of finding herself alone with Rougon. While Luigi was making up his mind, she tried to gain time.

"You must only let me have a bite. I'm frightfully hungry. Oh, only a mouthful or two."

She opened the door and, calling for Antonia gave the maid an order in Italian. And she had just resumed her seat on the edge of the table when Antonia appeared, bearing in each hand a slice of buttered bread, which she held out to her mistress as if on a tray, grinning as usual like an animal that was being tickled, a grin which turned her mouth to a red gash in her dark face. The task accomplished, she wiped her hands on her skirt, and went out, but Clorinda called her back to demand a glass of water.

"Like a piece?" she turned to Rougon. "It's very good butter. Sometimes I sugar it. But it's bad always to want the best food."

She certainly did not. One morning, Rougon had found her making her lunch off a scrap of cold omelette left over from the previous day. He had a suspicion that she was a cheese-parer. That was an Italian failing.

"Three minutes, all right, Luigi?" she cried, taking a big bite into her first slice. Then, turning back again to Rougon, still standing there, she resumed:

"Tell me, for instance, about M. Kahn. However did he get made a deputy?"

In the hope of extracting some involuntary admission from her, Rougon submitted to this new interrogation. He knew her to be most inquisitive about how everybody else managed their lives. She was always trying to catch details of any indiscretion, always on the *qui-vive* to learn the complex intrigues among which she lived. Big names generally intrigued her. He laughed.

"Why," he said, "Kahn was not made—he is a born deputy. I always imagine he cut his teeth on the benches of the Legislative Chamber. He was already a right-centre man under Louis-Philippe, and he supported the constitutional monarchy with really adolescent fervour. After '48, he crossed to left-centre, though without slacking in fervour in the least. He wrote a Republican profession of faith which was most eloquent. Today, he's back at right-centre, defending the Empire with fervour still unabated. . . . Otherwise? Well, he's the son of a Jewish banker of Bordeaux, he is head of a firm owning some ironworks near Bressuire, he has made himself an authority on finance and industry, and he lives quite modestly, always hoping some day to make big money, and last August 15th he was awarded the *Légion d'Honneur*, *officier* class."

Here, eyes vague, he pondered.

"I don't think I've missed anything out . . ." he murmured. "Oh yes, he has no children. . . ."

"What? Is Kahn married?" cried Clorinda.

With a gesture, she intimated that now M. Kahn no longer interested her. The man was a boor. He had never brought his wife out. Rougon then explained that though Mme. Khan lived in Paris, she was very retiring. Then, without waiting for further questions, he said:

"Now would you like M. Béjuin's biography?"

"Not at all," she said.

But he insisted.

"An *École Polytechnique* product. Author of booklets nobody ever reads. Manages the Saint-Florent cut-glass works, three leagues from Bourges. . . . He is an invention of the Prefect of the *Cher Département*."

"Oh, do stop!" she cried.

"A worthy fellow," he continued. "A good voter, never makes a speech, very patient, waits to be spoken to first, but

always present and gaping up at you, so as not to be forgotten. . . . I have put him down for the *Légion d'Honneur* too, *chevalier* class. . . ."

Finally she had to stop his mouth with her hand. She was quite nettled.

"Yes, and he's married too, he's not at all amusing. . . . I've seen his wife at your place. A dump. She invited me down to Bourges to see their factory."

She crammed the rest of the first slice into her mouth, and washed it down with a great gulp of water. With legs dangling from the table, body slumped a little, and head flung back, she began to swing her feet to and fro with a regular movement, the rhythm of which Rougon began to follow. At every swing her calves flexed under the muslin.

"And M. Du Poizat?" she enquired, after a pause.

"Du Poizat has been a Sub-Prefect," was all he said.

She shot him a swift glance, astonished at the brevity of this account.

"I know all that myself," she said. "What next?"

"What next? Later on, he will be a Prefect. Then he will get a decoration."

She understood. He did not intend to say any more. In any case, she had had no particular purpose in suggesting Du Poizat's name. Now she ran them all through on her fingers. Starting with her thumb, she murmured:

"M. d'Escorailles. Not a reliable man, he likes all women. . . . M. La Rouquette, no use, I know him too well. . . . M. de Combelot, another married one. . . ."

And then, when she paused at the ring finger, unable to think of anybody else, Rougon suddenly said, eyeing her fixedly:

"You are forgetting Delestang."

"How right you are," she cried. "Well, then tell me all about him."

"He's a handsome man," Rougon said at once, still without taking his eyes off hers. "He is very rich. I have always predicted a great future for him."

He ran on in like terms, with extravagant praise and all figures doubled. The model farm of *la Chamade*, he said, was worth a couple of millions. Delestang would certainly be in the government some day. But she maintained a scornful disdainful pout.

"Delestang's frightfully stupid," she murmured, at last.

"But of course!" said Rougon, with a subtle smile.

This witty definition that she had let fall, seemed to delight him. Then, with one of those sudden turns which were familiar to him now, she started on a new tack, and it was she who held his glance.

"You must know the Count de Marsy very well," she said, questioningly.

"Oh yes," he replied, without flinching, "of course I do."

He seemed to get still more entertainment out of this new probing of hers. Then, serious again, he spoke with great fairness and dignity.

"De Marsy," he explained, "is a man of astonishing intelligence. I feel it an honour to have such an opponent. . . . He has tried everything. He was an army colonel at twenty-eight. Later, we find him running a big factory. Since then he has in turn handled agriculture, finance, commerce. I understand that he even paints portraits and writes novels."

Clorinda forgot to eat. She seemed thoughtful.

"I had a talk with him the other evening," she said, very softly. "He is very fine indeed. . . . A princely man!"

"In my view," Rougon continued, "his cleverness tends to spoil him. I understand strength differently. I have heard de Marsy make puns on very serious occasions. All the same, the man has succeeded. He reigns as much as the Emperor does. All these bastards have good luck. . . . His outstanding feature is his grasp of things, he has a hand of iron, he is plucky and determined, very subtle and yet at the same time with a very light touch."

Involuntarily, she glanced down at Rougon's own hands. He noticed it, and ran on, with a smile:

"Oh, mine are just paws, don't you think? That is why de Marsy and I have never got on together. He wields a graceful sword, cutting men down right and left without ever a stain on his white gloves. I merely bludgeon."

He had clenched his fists, fleshy fists, the fingers hairy. He held them up, delighting in their massivity. Clorinda took her other slice of bread-and-butter and buried her teeth in it, still deep in thought. At last, she looked up at Rougon.

"Now then, yourself?" she demanded.

"You want my story now, do you? Nothing easier. My grandfather sold greenstuff. I was a hard-working little country

solicitor, far away from Paris, till I was thirty-eight. Yesterday I was still a nonentity. Unlike our friend Kahn, I did not use my shoulders to bolster up every régime in turn. Nor have I been through the *École Polytechnique*, like Béjuin. I have not got a fine name, like little Escorailles, or a handsome mug, like poor Combelot. I have not got the fine connections of La Rouquette, who owes his seat to his sister, General Llorentz's widow, now a Lady-in-Waiting. My father did not leave me five millions, made in the wine trade, as Delestang's did him. I was not born on the steps of a throne, like Count de Marsy, nor did I grow up trailing round at the skirts of a bluestocking, the pet of Talleyrand. No, I am a new man, all I have is these fists of mine. . . ."

He clapped them together, with a loud laugh, to make light of it all, but he had at the same time drawn himself very erect and might have been cracking stones in those fists of his, and Clorinda watched him with admiration.

"I was nothing. Now I am going to be what it pleases me to be," he ran on, forgetting himself and talking for himself alone. "I am a power, and when they talk big about their devotion to the Empire, all these others, they make me shrug my shoulders. Do they really love it? Do they really feel it? Would they not suit their book to any régime? But I grew to be what I am together with the Empire. I made the Empire and the Empire made me. . . . I was made *Chevalier* of the *Légion d'Honneur* after December 10th, *Officier* in January 1852, *Commandeur* on August 15th, 1854, and *Grand Officier* three months ago. Under the Presidency I held the portfolio of Public Works for a short time, then the Emperor sent me to Britain on a special mission, after that came the Premiership and the Senate . . ."

"And tomorrow, what comes then?" Clorinda wanted to know, with a laugh, with which she would have liked to mask her burning curiosity.

He looked sharply at her and stopped short.

"You are very inquisitive, Mademoiselle Machiavelli," he said.

This made her swing her legs more fiercely. For a while not a word was spoken. Seeing her again lost in deep meditation, Rougon thought it a favourable moment to get something out of her

"Women . . ." he began.

But she cut him short. Her glance uncertain, but smiling faintly at her own thoughts, she half-whispered:

"Oh, women are a different kettle of fish altogether."

This was all he got out of her. She finished off her bread-and-butter, drained a glass of pure water and then, with a spring which witnessed to her equestrian skill, was erect again on the table.

"Hello there, Luigi!" she cried.

For the past few moments the painter had been prowling round her and Rougon, gnawing at his moustaches. Now, with a sigh, he went back to his easel and took up his palette. The three minutes' grace which Clorinda had demanded had lasted quarter of an hour. Still enveloped in her black lace, she gradually froze on the table, till, finding her pose again, with one movement she slipped off the lace and was bare. She had turned back to marble, and was again devoid of shame.

The stream of carriages in the Avenue outside was thinner now. The setting sun poured a golden haze down the *Champs Elysées*, powdering the trees with light, as if the wheels of the traffic raised a red-hued dust. In the failing light of the tall bay windows, Clorinda's shoulders were flooded with a silky gleam of gold. Slowly, the heavens faded.

"Has Count de Marsy's marriage with that Wallachian princess really been decided on?" Clorinda asked, a few moments later.

"As far as I know," Rougon replied. "She is very rich. Marsy is always short of money. He's also said to be madly in love with her."

Nothing else broke the silence. Rougon sat on, feeling quite at home, with no thought of going. He was thinking things over, continuing his review of it all. Clorinda de Balbi was certainly entrancing. He summed her up rather as if he had long since left her. His eyes on the floor, he sank into thoughts which, if only half formulated, were very sweet, and that inward titillation was pleasing to him. He felt as if emerging from a warm bath, his limbs overcome with a delicious languor. He was penetrated now with a peculiar odour, harsh yet almost sugary. He would have found it good to stretch out on one of the sofas and doze off, wrapped in that emanation.

He was wakened sharply by the sound of voices. A tall, elderly man, who he had not seen enter, was planting a kiss

on Clorinda's forehead. With a smile, she was reaching down over the edge of the table to receive it.

"How do you do, my pet," the visitor said. "How lovely you are! Showing all you have?"

He sniggered faintly, and when in sudden modesty, Clorinda gathered her scrap of black lace round her, cried quickly:

"Oh, but no, it's very pretty, you can show it all, come on . . . Ah, my poor child, there's many another my eyes have seen!"

Then, turning towards Rougon, whom as he shook his hand he addressed as "my dear colleague", he added:

"Many's the time this young scamp forgot herself in my lap when she was a little one. Now she's got a bosom to blind a man with!"

It was veteran M. de Plouguern. He was sixty-six. Sent to the Chamber first under Louis Philippe to represent Finistère, he was one of the legitimist deputies who had made the pilgrimage to Belgrave Square, and after the vote of censure on himself and his companions which followed, he resigned. Later, after the 1848 Revolution, he exhibited a sudden tenderness for the Second Republic. Next a deputy to the Constituent Assembly, he welcomed that warmly. But now that the Emperor had provided him with a well-deserved retreat on the Senate, he was a Bonapartist, for the Empire. But at least he did know how to carry it all off like a real aristocrat. On occasion his great humility even ventured the spice of a touch of opposition. Being ungrateful amused him. Sceptical to the marrow of his bones, he defended religion and the family. He thought he owed this to his name, one of the most illustrious of Brittany. There were days on which he thought the Empire immoral and made no bones about declaring so. Yet his own life had been full of shady love affairs. He was a profligate with an inventive mind, who indulged freely in recondite pleasures of the flesh. There were stories told of his old age which made many a young man envious. It was on a trip to Italy that he had first met Countess de Balbi, whose lover he was for nearly thirty years. After breaks which lasted for years these two would reunite for three nights in whatever town happened to bring them together. According to one account, Clorinda was de Plouguern's child, but neither he nor the Countess were really sure about it, and since Clorinda had grown to womanhood, well-fleshed and desirable, the

veteran made out that in the old days he had been a constant companion of her father. His still eager eyes would feast on her and as an old family friend he took great liberties with her. Tall, lean, bony, M. de Plouguern was rather like Voltaire, whom indeed he worshipped secretly.

"Godfather," cried Clorinda. "You haven't looked at my portrait."

She called him this pet name because he was such an old friend. He stepped behind Luigi and with connoisseur's eyes squinted at the canvas.

"Delicious!" he murmured.

Rougon too went to have a look, and Clorinda herself jumped down from the table to see. All three were enraptured. It was a very fine piece of work. The artist had already covered the whole canvas with a light scumble of pink, white and yellow, all as luminous as water-colour, and the face, with its cupid's bow lips, its arched eyebrows, and the delicate vermilion scumble of its cheeks, had the pretty smile of a doll. It was a chocolate-box *Diana*.

"Oh, but just look at that, the little mole near my eye," cried Clorinda, clapping her hands in admiration. "Isn't Luigi good, he misses nothing!"

Rougon, usually bored by pictures, was charmed. At this moment he felt he understood art. He pronounced judgment with firm conviction:

"Very well drawn indeed!"

"And excellent colour, too," said M. de Plouguern. Those shoulders are real flesh. And the breasts—very pleasing! Especially the left-hand one. Fresh as a rosebud! . . . And what arms, by Jove! This darling of yours certainly has got astonishing arms. I find that curve just above the bend of the arm excellent! Perfect modelling!"

He turned to the artist.

"M. Pozzo," he said, "I congratulate you. I have already seen a *Girl Bathing* of yours. But this portrait is far better. . . . Why don't you have a show? I once knew a diplomatist who was a marvellous violinist. That did not prevent him pursuing his career in the diplomatic service."

Most flattered, Luigi bowed. But by now the light was beginning to fail and as, he said, he wanted to finish an ear, he begged Clorinda to resume her pose for just ten more minutes.

M. de Plouguern and Rougon went on talking art. Rougon declared that special studies had prevented his following the art movement during the past few years, but he assured M. de Plouguern that he had great admiration for fine work. He went so far as to say that colour left him rather cold, but a fine drawing afforded him full satisfaction, a drawing that is, which was capable of edifying him and inspiring him with great thoughts. For his part, M. de Plouguern only liked the old masters. He had visited all the galleries of Europe and really could not understand how men dared paint any more. All the same, last month he had had a small sitting-room done out by a completely unknown artist who really did show great talent.

"He painted in some little cupids, with flowers and foliage, all really very remarkable," he said. "You could pick the flowers he has painted, I do declare, and he put in insects, too—butterflies, ordinary flies, and May-bugs. You would think they were real. It really is very jolly too. . . . I do like jolly painting."

"Art is not intended to make us sad," Rougon agreed.

At this point, as they paced the room side by side, M. de Plouguern trod on something which broke with a little crack like a pea splitting.

"Whatever's that?" he cried.

He recovered a rosary which had slipped from an armchair into which Clorinda had apparently emptied her pockets. A glass bead adjoining the cross was smashed, and the crucifix too, a little silver thing, had one of its arms doubled back and crushed flat. Cupping the rosary in his hand, with a snigger the old man protested:

"My pet, why will you leave these little playthings of yours all over the place?"

Clorinda, however, turned scarlet. She leapt down from the table, lips quivering, eyes clouded with rage. Quickly drawing her wrap round her, she stuttered:

"The wicked, wicked man! He has broken my rosary!"

Weeping like a child, she snatched it away from him.

"Come, come," said M. de Plouguern, still laughing at her. "Just look at my little believer! The other morning she almost scratched my eyes out because when I saw she had a branch of box over her bed, I asked her what she swept out with such a little broom. Goodness gracious, do stop crying, do! You big ninny! God's all right, I tell you, I haven't broken anything off him!"

"You have, you have," she cried. "You've ruined it."

She had now abandoned the intimate *thou* with which she usually addressed him. With fingers that quivered she succeeded in getting the broken bead off the cord, then, sobbing more desperately than ever, she tried to straighten out the crucifix, first wiping it with her finger-tips, as if she saw drops of blood oozing out of the metal.

"It was the Pope himself," she muttered, "gave me that, the first time I went to see him with Mummy. He knows me very well, the Pope does, he calls me 'his pretty apostle', because once I said I would like to die for him. . . . It was my lucky rosary. Now it's lost its virtue, it will attract Satan. . . ."

"Look here, let me have it," M. de Plouguern interrupted her. "You'll ruin your nails if you insist on straightening that. . . . Silver is hard stuff, my pet."

He took the rosary back from her and gingerly tried to bend the arm of the crucifix back, without breaking it off. Clorinda had stopped crying. She followed every movement he made. Rougon too leant forward, still smiling. He was shockingly irreligious, so much so that Clorinda had nearly quarrelled with him on two different occasions because of ill-placed witticisms of his.

"Blast!" muttered M. de Plouguern. "Heaven knows; it is tough stuff. You see, I'm afraid of snapping it right off. . . . Then you would have a fine substitute, kid, wouldn't you?"

He tried again—and the crucifix did break clean into two parts.

"Oh, damnation to it!" cried M. de Plouguern. "That's done it, this time."

Rougon had begun to laugh openly, but, glaring furiously at them both, sombre-eyed, her features distorted, Clorinda clenched her fists and suddenly thrust them frantically back, as if intending to turn them out of the house. Completely losing control of herself now, she cursed them roundly in Italian.

"Oh, she's going to beat us, she's going to beat us," M. de Plouguern began to cry, with great amusement.

"There, you see what superstition results in," Rougon uttered.

But the elder man was suddenly grave. He stopped making light of the accident, and when the great man plunged blindly on with his ready-made phrases about the hateful influence of

the clergy, the lamentable education Catholic girls got, and the degradation of an Italy in the hands of the priests, he suddenly curtly said:

"It is religion makes States great."

"When it doesn't rot them like a sore," retorted Rougon. "Look at history. Were the Emperor not to keep the bishops respectful, they'd very soon get the better of him."

Now it was the turn of M. de Plouguern to lose his temper. He defended Rome. He spoke of lifelong convictions. Without religion, men sank back to the state of brute creation. He proceeded to plead the great cause of the family. The present age was an age of abomination. Never before had vice been so blatant, never had lack of faith put men's hearts in such turmoil.

"Not another word about your Empire," he wound up. "It is the bastard progeny of the Revolution. . . . Ah, we know all about it, your Empire dreams it will humble the Church. But we are ready, we shall not go like lambs to the slaughter. Just you try, my dear Monsieur Rougon, declaring those beliefs in the Senate."

"Please, please don't argue with him," Clorinda interjected. "If you goad him, he will only end up by spurning Jesus altogether. He is a disciple of the devil."

Rougon was utterly dumbfounded by this outburst. He gave in, and silence ensued, while Clorinda searched the floor for a fragment of her crucifix. When she found it, she painstakingly wrapped the pieces up in a scrap of newspaper. Her fury was now spent.

"By the by, my pet," said M. de Plouguern all at once, "I was forgetting, I haven't told you why I called. I have a box at the *Palais-Royal* this evening, and I'm taking you."

"What a godfather!" cried Clorinda, pink with delight again. "We'll go and wake Mummy!"

She gave him a kiss "for his trouble," she said with a smile, then turned to Rougon holding out her hand, and with an entrancing pout of her lips, said:

"Don't be angry with me, will you? But don't you make me angry again either, with your nasty pagan notions. . . . I'm quite silly, the moment anyone interferes with my religion. I could break off my dearest friendships for that."

Luigi had now pushed his easel into a corner, for he saw that he would be unable to finish the ear today. Taking his hat, he tapped Clorinda on the shoulder, to tell her he was

going. Seeing him out on to the landing, she closed the door of the room behind them, but they bade farewell so noisily that a little squeak from Clorinda, ending in a stifled laugh, was quite audible. When she appeared again, she said:

"I'll go and change, unless godfather would like to take me to the theatre like this."

All three found the idea most entertaining. Dusk had fallen. When Rougon left, Clorinda went downstairs with him, leaving M. de Plouguern alone for a moment, just long enough, she said, to slip on a frock. It was already quite dark on the stairs. Without a word, she led the way, so slowly that he felt her muslin tunic brush against his knees. Then, reaching the door, she entered her bedroom. She had taken a couple of steps before she turned back towards him. He had followed her. Here the twin windows shed a whitish haze on the unmade bed, the forgotten wash-bowl, the cat still sleeping on the pile of garments.

"You really are not angry with me?" she asked, in almost a whisper, holding out her hands to him.

He swore that he was not. He took her hands in his, then slithered his fingers up her arms, to the elbows, feeling his way softly under the black lace, lest his thick fingers tore the wrap. She had raised her arms slightly, as if to ease his effort. They were overshadowed by the screen and could not see each other's features clearly. Here, in her room, the close air of which he found rather suffocating, he was again overcome by that harsh, almost sugary odour which had already intoxicated him once. But, once past the elbows, his movements became brusque, he felt Clorinda slip away from him, and heard her cry through the door which they had left open behind them:

"Antonia! Do bring a light here! And get me out my grey gown!"

When Rougon found himself outside in the *Champs Elysees* Avenue, he stood for a while, confused, drinking in the fresh air coming down from the direction of the *Arc-de-Triomphe*. Clear of traffic now, the great avenue's gas-lamps were beginning to light up, one by one, their sudden glow stringing festoons of bright sparks in the shadows. He felt as if he had had what might have been a stroke. He drew his hands down over his face.

"Oh no!" he suddenly said, out loud. "Oh no, it would be too silly!"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE Christening procession was to start from the Clock Pavilion at five o'clock. The route ran along the main avenue of the Tuileries gardens, across the *Place de la Concorde*, down the *rue de Rivoli*, through the *Hôtel-de-Ville* square, over the *Pont d'Arcole*, down the *rue d'Arcole* and across the *Place du Parvis*.

Already by four o'clock there were dense crowds at the d'Arcole bridge. Here, where the river made a broad gash in the heart of Paris, there was room for an immense throng. Where the point of the island of St. Philippe cut the river into two arms, the horizon broadened suddenly. To the left, looking upstream, the lesser reach was engulfed, a narrow channel between low buildings, but to the right the main arm opened up a far vista, lost in bluish haze, in which, through a green blotch, one could make out the trees of the *Port-aux-Vins*, while downstream, on either side, from the *Quai St. Paul* to the *Quai de la Mégisserie*, from the *Quai Napoléon* to the *Quai de l'Horloge*, the footwalks ran along main streets, and the *Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville*, opposite the bridge, was really vast. Over all this great expanse the sky, a June firmament, both limpid and scorching, stretched a limitless roof of its blue infinity.

When the half-hour struck, there were folk everywhere. All along the pavements stood endless ranks of sight-seers, pressing close to the embankment walls, and a sea of human heads, constantly augmented by fresh incoming waves, filled the *Hôtel-de-Ville* square. Opposite, in the black chasms of wide-open windows, the ancient houses of the *Quai Napoléon* presented further tiers of faces and even in the gloomy little streets which abutted on the embankment—*la rue Colombe*, *la rue Saint-Landry*, *la rue Glatigny*—there were women's bonnets thrusting out of the throng, their ribbons fluttering in the wind. People had flooded over on to *Notre Dame* bridge and stood pressed elbow to elbow against the stones of the enclosing wall, as if this were the plush-drawn back of some other rank of seats in an auditorium above them.

At the other extreme, as far downstream as the *Louis Philippe* bridge, a swarming of black dots was visible, and the most distant windows, those little gashes barring the yellow and grey façades of the promontory of buildings which reared their walls there, constant flashes of colour showed as the gay frocks moved about. There were men on the roof-tops, amid the chimneys. Others whom one could not distinguish clearly were peering through field-glasses from their high balconies on the *Quai de la Tournelle*. Indeed, the slanting sun, full a-blaze, seemed itself to be but an emanation of these crowds. Waves of laughter eddied up from the surging flood of heads. Gawdy sunshades, gleaming like reflectors, radiated rings of starry light from the heart of that motley of feminine gowns and masculine coats.

But what was visible from every point, from the quais, from the bridges, and from every window, was a giant grey frock coat painted in profile on the bare wall of a six-storey building on the *Isle of St. Louis*. The left sleeve was folded at the elbow, as if the garment had preserved the stance and rotundity of the body which itself had now vanished. In the sunlight, above the teeming ant-heap of sight-seers, this monumental piece of publicity seemed somehow strangely important.

Already a double rank of men was parting the crowd, taking up positions to assure a clear passage, to the right, ranks of the national militia, to the left, soldiers of line regiments. One end of this double fence vanished down the *rue Arcole*, which was festive with flags fashioned of rich materials and strung from the windows, flapping limply all down the gulf of black-fronted masonry. The *Pont d'Arcole* itself, kept free of people, was the only stretch of clear ground in this universal occupation of every corner, so that it now made a strange impression, a deserted, airy construction, with its single, gently-curving iron span, though immediately underneath it, on the river banks, the crush began again. Simple Parisians in their Sunday best, handkerchiefs knotted on bare heads, squatting beside their spouses, all expectation, and also relieved to take a rest after an afternoon given up to seeing the sights.

Upstream from the bridge, in the centre of the river, just where it widens and greenish hues impinge on blue where the two arms meet, a crew of rowing-men in red jerseys were idling with their oars to keep their boat level with the *Port-aux-Fruits*. In addition, along the *Quai de Gèvres* there was a large

public laundry, the sluices of the barge green with running water. From here came waves of laughter and the steady thump of the laundresses' beetles. And all this mass of humanity, three to four hundred thousand heads all told, gazed up at the towers of the church of *Notre Dame*, sloping their rectangular blocks skywards, high above the buildings of the *Quai Napoleon*. Gilded by the setting sun, reverberating with a tremendous peal of bells, they quivered in the air, they turned rust-red in this clear air.

Two or three false alerts had already caused serious jostling in the crowd.

"But I keep telling you, they definitely won't come along before half past five," asserted a tall rakish fellow seated outside a *café* on the *Quai de Gèvres*, in the company of M. and Mme. Charbonnel.

It was Gilquin, Théodore Gilquin, a former tenant of Mme. Mélanie Correux's, a frightful friend of Rougon's. On this special occasion he was dressed out in a 29-franc reach-me-down outfit of yellow duck, which was threadbare, spotted, bursting at the seams. On his feet he had boots which gaped, on his hands bright tan gloves, on his head a straw boater minus the ribbon. When he donned gloves, Gilquin was dressed. Since midday he had been serving as guide to the Charbonnells, whose acquaintance he had made one evening in Rougon's kitchen.

"You shall see it all, my children," he repeated with a wipe of the straggling moustaches which drew a sombre furrow across his dipsomaniacal physiognomy. "Have you entrusted yourselves to me, or have you not? Well, then let me please be responsible for the timing and the movements of our little party."

Gilquin had already imbibed three glasses of brandy and five of beer. For the past two hours he had insisted on the Charbonnells sitting here with him, so they might be first on the scene, he said. It was a little *café* familiar to him, he said, where they would be just right. He addressed the waiter as an old friend. With resignation, the Charbonnells had submitted. They were surprised equally by the copiousness and the variety of M. Gilquin's conversation. Mme. Charbonnel had restricted her order to a glass of sugar and water. M. Charbonnel had taken a small cordial, just as he had on occasion done before, in the company of fellow business men in Plassans. And

Gilquin had entertained them with talk about the Christening, just as if he had spent the whole morning at the Tuileries, collecting information.

"The Empress is very happy about it," he said. "It was a lovely confinement. Ah, what a woman, she is, and no mistake! You'll see in a minute what a regal bearing she has. . . . Did you know that the Emperor only got back from Nantes the day before yesterday. He went down because of the floods. . . . Ah, now, what a misfortune that has been!"

Mme. Charbonnel moved her chair back a little. She was slightly afraid of the crowds pouring past her. The rally of people was growing steadily more compact.

"What a lot of people!" she murmured.

"I should think so, indeed!" cried Gilquin. "There are more than three hundred thousand strangers alone in Paris today. For the past week. excursion trains have been bringing the whole countryside in. . . . Look, those are Normandy folk, over there! And there are some from Gascony! And look, Franche-Comté people! Oh, I spot them all immediately, I can tell you, I've knocked about a bit."

He then went on to inform them that the law courts were closed today, the Bourse was closed, and all Government offices had given their staffs the day off. The whole capital was celebrating this Christening. He went on now to give figures, reckoning up what the ceremony and all the festivities were costing. The Legislative Body had voted four hundred thousand francs, he said, but that was a wretched sum. A Palace groom had told him only yesterday the procession alone was going to cost near two hundred thousand. If the Emperor got away with making up only a million taken out of his civil-list revenues, he could think himself lucky. The layette alone had been a hundred thousand franc job.

"A hundred thousand francs!" repeated Mme. Charbonnel, dumbfounded. "But what is it made of? And whatever has been done to it to bring the figure up to that sum?"

Gilquin gave a condescending laugh. Some kinds of lace, he said, were very expensive. In his time he had travelled in lace. He went on with his estimates. There was to be a gift of fifty thousand francs to the parents of all babies born in wedlock on the same day as the little prince. The Emperor and Empress insisted on being godfather and godmother to them all. Eighty-five thousand more francs were going on the

purchase of medals for the composers of special cantatas to be sung in the theatres. He wound up with details of the one hundred and twenty thousand commemorative medals to be presented to the pupils of all high schools and to children in primary schools and homes too, also to non-commissioned officers and the ranks in the forces of the Paris garrison. He had one himself, he said. He showed it them. It was a medal of the size of a two-franc piece. On one side it bore the profiles of Emperor and Empress, on the other that of the Imperial Prince, with the date of the Christening—June 14th, 1856.

"Would you part with that to me?" asked M. Charbonnel.

Gilquin said he would, but when worried about the cost, the worthy little man offered him a franc, he magnanimously declined it, saying the thing was not worth more than half that sum. Mme. Charbonnel meanwhile had been examining the profiles of the Imperial couple. They went to her heart.

"They do look so kind," she murmured. "There they are, close to each other, they are so fine! Look!" she said in tones of deep respect, to her husband, "one might think their two heads were sharing one pillow when you look at it from this side."

Gilquin steered the conversation back to the Empress, praising her charitable sentiments. When she was nine months gone, she still devoted whole afternoons to the institution of a school for poor girls, at the very top of the *Faubourg St. Antoine*. And she had just declined a present of twenty-four thousand francs, made up of the pennies of ordinary people, as a present to the young prince. At her express wish the money was going to pay for the articling of about a hundred apprentices.

Gilquin was already a little intoxicated. He rolled his eyes alarmingly in efforts to find a suitably emotional tone of voice and turns of speech which would combine the respect of a loyal subject and passionate masculine admiration. He declared that he would gladly sacrifice his life at the feet of so noble a lady.

However, there was nobody in the offing to take up the challenge. Solely the distant murmur of the crowd as it grew into a continuous din, seemed to echo his praises, while the bells of *Notre Dame* pealed their tremendous delight, all out, above the roof-tops.

"Perhaps it is time we took up our positions," ventured M. Charbonnel, who in any case was tired of sitting.

Mme. Charbonnel was on her feet gathering her yellow scarf round her throat, in a jiffy.

"I am sure it is time we went," she murmured. "You wanted to be among the first, yet here we stay, letting everybody else get there first."

This only served to annoy Gilquin. He brought his fist down with an oath on the little galvanised-iron table-top. Did they think he did not know his Paris? And as, abashed, Mme. Charbonnel sank back to her seat, Gilquin called across to the waiter:

"Jules, bring an *absinthe* and some cigars!"

Then, having dipped his heavy whiskers into the absinthe, he called the man back angrily.

"Are you trying to make a fool of me?" he nagged. "Please take this dope away and serve me from the other bottle! The one I had Friday! . . . I used to travel in liqueurs, old boy! You can't diddle Théodore Gilquin!"

He calmed down again when the waiter, who seemed afraid of him, brought the bottle he wanted. Patting the Charbonnels on the back most amicably, he began to address them as Dad and Mum.

"What's this, Mum, tootsies getting the fidgets, eh? Get away with y', you'll have time to tire 'em out before night comes. . . . Tell me straight, Dad, aren't we all right here? What's wrong with this place, eh? We've got a nice seat, haven't we? See people going by. . . . We've got time, I tell you. . . . Order som'ing for y'r self."

"No, thank you," M. Charbonnel assured him. "Mme. Charbonnel and I have had all we require."

Gilquin had now lit a cigar. Tipping back his chair, he tucked his thumb in his waistcoat armholes, puffed out his chest and began to rock his chair to and fro, his eyes swimming with beatitude. All at once, an idea occurred to him.

"I say—I haven't told you, have I?" he cried. "The plan . . . Here it is! . . . Tomorrow morning—I'll be round at your place, seven sharp, to take you round. I'll show you the whole works. Now, isn't that—a grand idea?"

Alarmed now, the Charbonnels exchanged glances, but Gilquin just ran on with all the programme he now proposed. He might have been a circus man trying to wheedle a couple of bears into doing something. It would be lunch at the *Palais-Royal*, then a stroll about town, the *Invalides* esplanade in the

afternoon, military tattoo, the greasy pole, three hundred toy balloons complete with bags of sweets, and a big one raining down sugared almonds. In the evening, dinner at a wine merchant's place. The main room would be got up as a baptistery. Then there would be more of those strolls about town, to see the illuminations. And he told them about the cross of fire which was to be hoisted over *Légion d'Honneur House*, of the fairy palace on the *Place de la Concorde* which had required no less than nine hundred and fifty thousand pieces of coloured glass, of the *Saint Jacques Tower*, the statue on the summit of which would look like a lighted torch. Seeing after all this that the Charbonnells were still hesitant, Gilquin leant forward and lowered his voice.

"Then, on the way home," he whispered, "we can drop in at a milk bar in the *rue de la Seine* where they give you a marvellous cheese soup "

After that, the Charbonnells could not possibly refuse any longer. Their wide-open eyes were eloquent with both curiosity and the dismay of a child. They felt themselves becoming the tools of this frightful person. Yet Mme. Charbonnel could do no more than murmur: "Oh, this Paris, this Paris! But now we are here, we ought to see it all. But, M. Gilquin, if only you knew how peaceful our life at Plassans was! And my stores of jams at home! They will be all going bad, and crystallized fruits, cherries in brandy, gherkins."

"Don't you worry, Mum," cried Gilquin, now so full of liquor that he had actually begun to address her most intimately, *thou-ing* and *thee-ing* her. "You just win your lawsuit, Mum, then ask me down, eh? We'll all go down together and we'll soon get through that jam!"

He poured himself another glass of *absinthe*. He was quite drunk now. For an instant he eyed the Charbonnells with sentimental fondness. He liked everybody to be sentimental. Then suddenly, there he was on his feet, waving his long arms, helloing, whistling and beckoning. It was Mme. Mélanie Correur, in dove-grey silk, on her way on the opposite pavement. She looked round, but the sight of Gilquin seemed to annoy her. Nevertheless, she crossed the road, her hips swaying with truly queenly gait. She stood at their table for some time before she could be persuaded to take anything.

"But, I say, just a little glass of black-currant cordial," said Gilquin. "Why, you're so fond of it . . . don't you remember,

in the *rue Vanneau*? Wasn't that a rum time, eh? What a great ninny Correur was, wasn't he?"

At last she did sit down, just as a tremendous burst of cheering swept through the populace. As if a hurricane had swept down on them, the crowds were suddenly carried away, all trampling forward, like a flock of sheep out of control. Instinctively, the Charbonnels got up, to join them, but Gilquin's heavy hand forced them back to their chairs. He was scarlet with anger.

"Damnation, don't budge, I tell you! Wait for the word of command. . . . Can't you see what loonies they all are! Why, it's only five o'clock? That's the Papal Legate arriving. Damnation to him, eh? Papal Legate indeed! If you ask me, it's a personal insult, the Pope not coming in person. Is he the godfather or isn't he? Isn't that the way to look at it? I swear it, the kid won't be along for half an hour yet."

Gradually, his intoxication was robbing him of any sense of decency. He had tipped back his chair again, and lolled there, puffing smoke in people's faces, winking at the ladies and shooting challenging glances at the men. Suddenly a traffic block developed at the *Notre Dame* bridge, a few paces away. Horses began to rear with impatience, and the gold-braided, decoration bestarred uniforms of high dignitaries and superior officers appeared at carriage doorways.

"There's some ironmongery for you!" muttered Gilquin, with a supercilious smile. But, a moment later, as a brougham bowled up the *Quai de la Mégisserie*, he was all excitement, and nearly overturned the table."

"Heavens! Rougon!" he cried.

There he stood, waving his gloved hand in salute, then, afraid of not being noticed, took his boater and waved that. Swiftly Rougon, whose senatorial regalia were attracting great attention, buried himself at the back of the brougham. But when he did this Gilquin cupped his hands to make a megaphone and yelled to him. People on the opposite pavement at once pressed forward, turning their heads in an effort to make out against whom this lanky rascal in yellow duck had a grudge, but at last the coachman was able to flick his whip again, and the brougham bowled away over the *Notre-Dame* bridge.

"Do please be quiet!" hissed Mme. Charbonnel, plucking at Gilquin's arm.

But he was not going to sit down at once. He strained up on tiptoe to follow the brougham amid the other carriages and then sent a wild outburst flying after the twinkling wheels:

"Oh! what a skunk! All because he's got a bit of guilt on his coat now! Ah, my fine fellow, that didn't prevent you many a time going out in Théodore's boots!"

Respectable gentlemen with their ladies at the seven or eight other café tables about him opened wide eyes. The company at the very next table, father, mother and three children, seemed particularly interested to hear what had been said. Gilquin expanded with delight now that he had an audience. Slowly scrutinizing the patrons of the café, table by table, he at last sat down, to declare, at the top of his voice:

"Rougon? It's I who made that man!"

When Mme. Correur tried to restrain him, he merely called her to bear witness. She knew all about it, she did, it all happened at her place, didn't it? *Hôtel Vanneau, rue Vanneau!* Surely she was never going to deny that he had lent Rougon his boots scores of times to go calling on smart folk when he was busy rigging shady deals of some sort, one could never make head or tail of it all. In those days all Rougon had to his name was one down-at-heel pair of slovenly shoes, things that an old clo' man would have turned up his nose at. And, leaning sideways with triumph towards the next table, to draw the family party into the conversation, Gilquin cried:

"*Parbleu*, of course she won't deny it. Why, it was she who bought the man the first pair of new boots of his own that he ever had in Paris!"

Mme. Correur had now demonstratively turned her chair away, to mark herself as nothing to do with Gilquin's company, while the Charbonnells turned deathly white, hearing the man who was to put half a million in their pockets referred to in such terms. But Gilquin had got going, and with endless detail he now related the whole story of how Rougon had begun. He himself, he said, was a philosophical soul, it was something he could laugh about. Taking first one group at the café tables, then another, into particular confidence, as he smoked and spat and tippled, he informed them that he was quite inured to man's ingratitude, all he cared about was his own self-respect. But, he kept on repeating, he had made Rougon. He was travelling in perfumery at the time. But business was bad. That was owing to the Republic. Rougon and he had

rooms on the same landing. They were both starving. It was he who had hit on the idea of getting Rougon to persuade a man with some land down at Plassans to send him up olive oil. They then had set to work, dividing Paris between them and tramping the streets till ten at night with samples of the oil. Rougon was not much good at it. Nevertheless, he did sometimes bring back good orders. He got them from the nobs, whose receptions he used to attend. Oh, what a rogue the fellow was! A goose was not in it for stupidity in lots of ways, but the fellow knew a trick worth two, all the same. How cleverly, later on, he made Théodore sag for him in political work!

Here, with knowing winks, Gilquin lowered his voice a little. After all, he had been one of the band himself. He used to do the shady dance-halls on the outskirts of Paris, shouting slogans. *Up the Republic!* And one had to be a damned keen republican too, to recruit anybody. The Empire owed a lot to him, and no question. And what had he got? Not even a thank-you. While Rougon and his clique shared out the cake, he was kicked out of the door, as if he were a mangy dog. But that suited him better. He would rather be independent. The only thing he did rather regret was never having gone the whole hog with the republicans, they ought to have rifle-butted all that scum out.

"Just like that squirt Du Poizat, who pretends not to recognize me at all now!" he wound up. "Many's the time I filled that little rat's pipe for him. . . . Du Poizat a Sub-Prefect! I've seen him in his nightshirt with big Amélie, she'd send him flying out of the door with a box of the ears when he'd been on the rantan."

He was silent a moment, suddenly maudlin, his eyes swimming with intoxication, then, apostrophizing the whole gathering, he continued:

"Well, you've just seen Rougon. . . . I'm as big a man as he is. I'm the same age. I flatter myself my head's got a little more breeding about it than his. Tell me, plastered with gold braid, wouldn't I cut a finer figure in a brougham than that hog?"

However at this point such a clamour arose from the *Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville* that none of the patrons of the café gave much thought to informing Gilquin on this point. The crowds surged away again. All one could see for a moment were the soles of men's boots and the women-folk with their skirts up

to their knees and much show of white stocking, the better to run. And when the clamour now drew nearer, swelling into a more and more distinct sound as of wolves baying, Gilquin suddenly yelled:

"Hi! That'll be the brat! .. Come on, Papa Charbonnel! Quick! Settle the bill! Everybody, follow me!"

Not to get detached from him in the crowd, Mme. Correur had taken hold of one of the tails of his yellow duck coat, Mme. Charbonnel panting after. They nearly left M. Charbonnel behind, for Gilquin now charged forward with great determination, elbowing a way clear, opening a passage for them. He worked his way forward with such authority that the densest ranks of spectators made way before him. When he got through to the embankment wall, he marshalled his little company. With a great effort, he lifted the ladies into a sitting position on the embankment wall, their legs dangling down over the river, an operation not accomplished without many little squeals of alarm. With M. Charbonnel, he then took up a stand behind the ladies.

"Well, my pussies," he said to reassure them, "now you're in the front boxes, don't be afraid, we'll slip our arms round your waists to make sure."

He suited the action to the word himself round Mme. Correur's ample girth, to be rewarded with a beaming smile. One simply could not be angry with the rascal, could one? But despite this advantageous position, they could see nothing. Over towards the square the heads of the crowd were like rippling water and a flood of cheering surged into the air. Afar-off, invisible hands were waving hats, thereby raising a vast black pall over the crowd, and this gradually crept nearer. Then the houses along the *Quai Napoléon* facing the square were the first to come to life, with people straining up at every window, elbowing one another, faces enraptured, outstretched arms pointing out something over to the left, in the direction of the *rue de Rivoli*. For three minutes more, which seemed to last for ever, the bridge remained vacant, while the *Notre Dame* bells seemed to go mad with delight and rang louder than ever.

All at once, out of the heart of the straining multitudes trumpeters appeared. They set foot on the deserted bridge, and then a huge sigh swept over it all, followed by silence. Behind the trumpeters and the brass band which followed

them, came a general on horseback, with his staff. Next, after squadrons of heavy cavalry, dragoons and men of the guides regiment, the first decorated carriages appeared. First came eight all together, each drawn by six horses. These first carriages bore ladies-in-waiting, court chamberlains, officers of the Emperor's and Empress's households, and ladies of honour of the Grand-Duchess of Baden, representing the mother-in-law. Without slackening his grip on her, Gilquin explained to Mme. Correur's back that just like the father-in-law, the mother-in-law—the Queen of Sweden—simply had not bothered to put in a personal appearance. When next the seventh and eighth carriages passed, Gilquin identified the persons in them with a familiarity which revealed him to be well up in Court matters. Those two ladies, he said, were Princess Mathilda and Princess Marie. Those three gentlemen were King Jérôme, Prince Napoléon and the Crown Prince of Sweden. With them they had the Grand-Duchess of Baden. The procession made slow progress. On the carriage steps rode grooms, aides-de-camp, and knights of honour, keeping the horses on tight snaffles to ensure a high-stepping gait.

"But wherever is the baby?" asked Mme. Charbonnel, impatiently.

"Dammit, not tucked him under the seat!" laughed Gilquin. "You just wait, he's coming."

He now squeezed Mme. Correur with increased abandon and she was relaxing into his arms because, so she said, she was afraid of falling. Wonder was now taking possession of him. With glistening eyes, he murmured again:

"When all's said and done, it really is rather lovely, isn't it? They make a fine show, the rascals, in their silk casings. . . . And to think that I helped to engineer it all!"

He was puffed with pride. The procession, the crowds, the whole world were his. Now the brief hush caused by the first appearance of the carriages gave way to a tremendous burst of cheering, and along the embankment too men's hats began to fly above the sea of heads. Gay in their green livery, and round caps, from each of which dangled the gilt fringe of a large tassel, six Imperial Lancers came riding down the very centre of the bridge, and at last, drawn by eight horses, there was the Empress's carriage, four lanterns, very ornate, at its four corners. All windows, this spacious, rounded vehicle was more like a large cut-glass case, ornate with gold framing,

and mounted on wheels of gold. Inside, in a cloud of white lace, could clearly be seen the Imperial Prince, a little pink blotch on the lap of the Governess of the Children of France, close beside her the wet-nurse, a comely Burgundian lass with an enormous bosom. Next, some distance behind, after a group of stable-boys on foot and some grooms, came the Emperor. His coach too was drawn by eight horses and was of similar grandeur. In it were he and his Empress, acknowledging the cheers of the people. On the steps of the two coaches rode court marshals, impassively gathering the dust of the streets on the appliqué braiding of their uniforms.

"Oh, just think—if that bridge were to collapse!" suddenly sniggered Gilquin, who had a penchant for imagining the most unseemly misfortunes.

He quite frightened Mme. Correur, and she tried to silence him, but he insisted. Cast-iron bridges, he said, were never very safe, and when both carriages together were on the bridge he declared he could see the iron plates spring. What a sousing they would have, they would all three get a bibful, wouldn't they?

The carriages rolled on soundlessly, at even pace, and the floorplates of the bridge were so frail and curved so gently that the carriages might indeed have been suspended in mid-air over the great gulf of the river. They were reflected down in that blue reach, like so many strange goldfish swum in at the turn of the tide. Slightly wearied, glad for a moment to be free of the crowds and not have to respond, the Emperor and Empress had leant their heads back on the quilted satin upholstery. The Governess of the Children of France likewise was taking advantage of the empty bridge to set the little Prince, who had slipped down, firmly back on her lap, while the wet-nurse bent forward and entertained the infant with smiles.

The whole procession was bathed in sunlight. Uniforms, festive gowns, military equipment, it was all glitter. The carriages blazed with light, sparkling like stars, their plate glass flashing gay irradiation on to the dingy houses of the *Quai Napoléon*. Far beyond, above the bridge, as background to this scene, reared that monumental piece of publicity painted on the wall of a six-storey block on the *Ile Saint-Louis*, that giant grey coat devoid of body, on to which, in apocalyptic glory, poured the radiant sunlight. And just as that coat

towered above the two imperial carriages, that silhouette caught Gilquin's eye for an instant:

"I say," he cried, "look at uncle, over there!"

From the crowd immediately about them, came a responsive ripple of laughter. This reference to the first Napoleon, however, escaped M. Charbonnel. He wanted to know what the joke was. But by then nobody was any longer at all interested. Deafening cheering had arisen, and the three hundred thousand persons crushed there all clapped their hands. When the little Prince was half-way across the bridge and on that broad expanse where nothing hindered the view, the Emperor and Empress had been sighted behind him, the gaping crowds were overcome by an extraordinary burst of emotion. There then occurred one of those highly strung manifestations of mass enthusiasm which carry people off their feet as if struck by a tornado. People went wild from one end of Paris to the other. Men stood on tiptoe, balancing small children astraddle on their shoulders, and women wept, stuttering with sentimentalities about how "sweet" the baby was, thus to the bottom of their hearts sharing the domestic contentment of the Imperial couple. A continuous storm of applause came from the *Hôtel-de-Ville* and the embankments on either side of the river, upstream and downstream alike, presented a continuous forest of waving, greeting arms. Handkerchiefs fluttered from the windows full of people leaning far out over the sills, their gaping mouths dark gashes in their enthusiastic faces, while in the far distance, downstream, narrow as fine lines of charcoal, the windows of Saint Louis island, scintillated with little flecks of white, evidence of life which could otherwise not clearly be distinguished. And all the time that crew of boating-men in red jerseys, now standing in their boat amidstream, while the Seine drifted them away, yelled their heads off, and the washerwomen, half emerging from the glazed shelter of their barge, bare-armed and, unrestrained, wild with excitement in their intention to make themselves heard, banged their beetles frantically enough to break them.

"That's all," said Gilquin, "now we can be going."

But the Charbonnels wanted to see to the very end. The tail of the procession—squadrons of household cavalry, cuirassiers and heavy cavalry—was now entering the *rue d'Arcole*. A terrible confusion followed. The double barrier of national guards and soldiers was broken at several points. Women screamed.

"Let's be going," repeated Gilquin. "We don't want to get crushed."

When he had set the ladies down again on the pavement, he led them straight back across the road, despite the crowd. Mme. Correur and the Charbonnels had wanted to follow the embankment wall as far as the *Notre Dame* bridge, then go and see what was happening in the *Place du Parvis*. But Gilquin would not hear of it, and dragged them off. When they were back outside the little café, he hustled them unceremoniously to the table they had occupied before and made them sit down.

"You silly cuckoos," he nagged away, "do you think I want to get my toes crushed under all that crowd of gapers? I should think not! What we're going to do is have a nice little drink. It's better here than in the thick of a crowd. Surely we've had enough of the festivities? It was getting rather silly. Well, Ma, what's yours?"

As he delivered himself of this, Gilquin kept his eyes uneasily on the Charbonnels. They raised faint objections. They really would have liked to see them come out of church. So he explained that the thing to do was to let the gapers disperse a bit. In a quarter of an hour he would take them round. That is, if there were not too many people about. While he was giving Jules a fresh order for beer and cigars, Mme. Correur made good her escape.

"Well, there you are, have a nice rest," she told the Charbonnels. "You find me there."

She crossed by the *Pont Notre-Dame* and entered the *rue de la Cité*, but there were such crowds that it took her more than a quarter of an hour to get to the *rue de Constantine*. She then had to resign herself to cutting through the *rue de la Licorne* and the *rue des Trois-Canettes*. At last, she came out at the *Place du Parvis*, having left a complete flounce of her dove-grey gown on a ventilator of a certain shady establishment. The *Parvis* square was well sanded and full of flowers and masts with banners bearing the imperial coat of arms. A huge canopy of red velvet with gilt fringes and tassels had been erected to form a porch-awning which was draped tent-like against the bare stones.

Here, Madame Correur was halted by a barrier of soldiery which was holding the crowds back. In the large square space which was being kept clear, footmen were treading up and down beside the carriages parked in five rows, grave coachmen on their boxes, reins in hand. Peering about, to find some

means of getting through, Mme. Correur now discerned Du Poizat, peacefully puffing at a cigar in one corner of the square, footmen all round him.

"Can't you get me in?" she asked of him, once she had succeeded in calling his attention by waving her handkerchief.

He said a word to an officer, then led her up to the church.

"Believe me, you'd far better stay here with me," he said. "It's cram-full inside. I found it so stifling, I came out. . . . Look, the Colonel and Mme. Bouchard too have given up trying to squeeze in."

Yes, there they were, to the left, towards the *rue du Cloître Notre Dame*. M. Bouchard imparted the information that he had entrusted his wife to M. d'Escorailles, because that gentleman had a wonderful seat for a lady. The Colonel's great regret was being unable to explain the ceremony to his son Auguste.

"I should have liked him to see the famous christening chalice being used. As of course you know, it was St. Louis's own chalice, copper engraved and enamelled in the loveliest Persian style, an antiquity of the times of the Crusades, which has served ever since for the christening of all our kings.

"Did you see the regalia?" M. Bouchard asked Du Poizat.

"I did," he replied. "The *chrisom* was carried by Lady de Llorentz."

He had to tell them all about it. The *chrisom* was of course the christening veil. Neither of the two men now informed had been aware of this fact. They were at once all admiration. So Du Poizat ran through all the regalia of the Imperial Prince—*chrisom, candle, salt-cellar*—then those of the godfather and godmother—the *stoup* and the *ewer* and the *towel*. All these objects were carried by ladies-in-waiting. There was also the little Prince's cloak. A superb piece, that, astonishing work. It had been laid out on a chair near the font.

"What?" cried Mme. Correur. "Not even room for a little one?"

These details made her feverishly inquisitive. The gentlemen now detailed for her all the great corporations and authorities and delegations that they had seen go by. It had been an endless stream of them: the Diplomatic Corps, the Senate, the Legislative Body, the Government, the Supreme Court, the Audit Office, the Imperial Household, the Commercial Courts, the Magistrates' Courts, not to speak of the Ministers,

the Prefects, the Mayors and Deputy Mayors, the Members of the Academy, the senior Officers, even representatives of the Jewish and Protestant communities. And still more. It was endless.

"Heavens, how lovely it must have been!" gasped Mme. Correur, and she heaved a sigh.

Du Poizat shrugged his shoulders. He was in a black mood. All these dignitaries "bored him stiff". He even seemed outraged by the length of the ceremony. Were they never going to end? They had sung the *Veni Creator*, they had been censed, they had processed, they had been saluted. By now the kid must surely be christened. More patient, M. Bouchard and the Colonel gazed up at the bunting-decked windows of the square, then, as a sudden peal of bells shook the towers, cocked their heads back to stare up at them. A shudder then ran through them. The closeness of that huge church alarmed them, they could not see the end of it, thrusting into the heavens. Meanwhile, Auguste had crept close to the porch. Mme. Correur followed him. But when she had come up dead opposite the main entrance, with both wings of the great doors now wide open, she was rooted to the pavement by the astonishing sight.

Between the two enormous curtains stretched the immense gulf of the great cathedral, a superman's vision of a temple. The vaults of the roof were soft blue, sown with stars. Around this firmament the stained glass offered the eye mystic stars which thrust glowing jets of flame as from braziers of precious stones. On all sides a drapery of scarlet velvet hung from the lofty columns, swallowing up the vestiges of daylight which lingered in the nave and in the very centre of this crimson night glowed a blazing pyre of candles, thousands of candles packed close, so near one to another that they made one single sun which was blazing fiercely in a hail of sparks. In the very centre of the transept, on a platform, the altar itself was afire. To left and right towered the thrones. On a broad base of ermine-bordered velvet, above the higher throne, reared a giant bird with snowy bosom and purple wings. And a concourse of the wealthy, all a-sheen with gilt, lighted by the glitter of jewellery, filled the church. Behind all this, near the altar, the clergy, all bishops, with their crosses and mitres, furnished a vision of glory, a dazzling sight, a window opened into Heaven. Round the raised dais were princes and princesses and great dignitaries, arranged with supreme splendour, while on either side, in

the wings of the transept, rose grand-stands, on the right the Diplomatic Corps and the Senate and on the left, the Legislative Body and the Government, while delegations of all sorts were crowded into the remainder of the nave, and, higher up, beside the galleries, the ladies with their gay gowns formed patches of brilliant colour. The whole air vibrated with a blood-coloured haze. The heads rising in ranks one above the other behind, to left, to right, were of the pink hue of Dresden china. The costumes—satin, silk, velvet—shone with sombre flashes of light, as if on the point of catching fire. Indeed, at moments whole rows of them did suddenly blaze up. The immense depths of the church glowed furnace-hot with a luxury beyond belief.

Mme. Correur now saw a Master of Ceremonies come forward, in the heart of the choir, and in frantic tones three times cry:

“Long live the Imperial Prince, long live the Imperial Prince, long live the Imperial Prince!”

It was then, amid the vast murmur of approval which shook the fabric of the very roof, that Mme. Correur realized that to one side of the platform the Emperor was now erect, dominating the whole concourse. He stood out against the flaming gold which the bishops behind him had lighted, a black figure, and he now presented the Imperial Prince to the people of France, on his two hands holding very high above his head a small package of lace.

At this point, most unceremoniously, a guard sharply waved Mme. Correur back. She took only a couple of paces, then facing her there was suddenly nothing but the curtains of the improvised porch. The vision had entirely vanished. She was again in broad daylight. Dumbfounded, she stood stock still, thinking she had beheld some old master painting, like those in the Louvre, a canvas matured by age, rich with purple and gilt, and personalities of antiquity whom one never meets on the pavements of Paris.

“Don’t stand there,” she heard Du Poizat telling her.

He led her over to where the Colonel and M. Bouchard were standing. These gentlemen were now discussing the floods. In the Rhône and Loire valleys the ravages were frightful. Thousands of families were homeless. Donations to the relief funds opened everywhere were proving insufficient to relieve the suffering. But the Emperor was demonstrating a courage

and generosity which were admirable. At Lyons, he had actually been seen wading through low-lying parts of the town which were now under water. At Tours he had rowed in a boat about the flooded streets for three hours. And everywhere he had handed out gifts without calculation.

"Listen to that!" the Colonel interrupted.

It was the organ, now throbbing in the church. From the gaping orifice of the porch came the measured sound of massed singing; under that vast breath the drapery seemed to sway gently.

"That's the *Te Deum*," M. Bouchard said.

Du Poizat heaved a sigh of relief. At last, then, they were about to finish! But here M. Bouchard pointed out that the necessary documents had yet to be signed. Next, the Papal Legate was to deliver the Pope's blessing. Nevertheless, some people were already coming out. One of the first was Rougon, on his arm a thin, very simply dressed woman, with a sallow complexion. Accompanying them was a judge, in the garb of President of the Court of Appeal.

"Who are they?" asked Mme. Correur.

Du Poizat named them both. M. Beulin-d'Orchère had met Rougon shortly before the *coup d'état*, and ever since had shown a particular respect for him, though he had never tried to establish any connected friendship between them. Mlle. Véronique, his sister, lived with him in a house in the *rue Garancière*, from which she never emerged except to attend low mass at *Saint-Sulpice*.

"There now," declared the Colonel, lowering his voice, "that's the sort of wife Rougon needs."

"Exactly," agreed M. Bouchard. "A nice little bit of money, a good family, a staid woman who at the same time knows the world. He would never find a better match."

Du Poizat, however, was indignant. That girl, he said, was as sappy as a medlar forgotten in the straw. She was at least thirty-six and she looked forty. A fine broomstick for a man to take to bed with him. A pious old maid who wore her hair plastered down. A head so worn out, so colourless, that she might well have been soaking it in holy water for the past six months."

"You are young," the *chef de bureau* gravely assured him. "Rougon needs to marry sensibly. . . . True, I made a love match myself, but everybody can't make a success of that."

"Oh well, as far as that goes," Du Poizat admitted at last, "I'm very worried about the girl, it's Beulin-d'Orchère's mug that terrifies me. That old rascal has the physiognomy of a bloodhound. . . . Just look at the man, with his long snout and that tangle of frizzled hair without a single white one, despite his fifty years. Can you tell what goes on in that man's head? Perhaps you can put me wise why he's always thrusting his sister into Rougon's arms, now Rougon's down and out?"

M. Bouchard and the Colonel said nothing, merely exchanging uneasy glances. Was this "bloodhound", as the ex-Sub-Prefect dubbed him, really going to make Rougon all his own? Mme. Correur however slowly said:

"It is a great asset, you know, when you have the law on your side."

Meanwhile, Rougon had conducted Mlle. Beulin-d'Orchère to her carriage. Here, as she was about to enter, he bowed. At that very moment fair Clorinda emerged from the cathedral, on Delestang's arm. Her expression immediately darkened and she shot a fierce glance at the tall yellow girl, as with great courtesy Rougon in his senatorial garb closed her carriage door. A moment later, as the Beulin-d'Orchère carriage moved off, she left Delestang's arm and made straight for Rougon, again on her lips her usual adolescent smile. The whole band of them followed her.

"I've lost Mummy!" she called to him, laughingly. "She's got herself abducted somewhere in all this crowd. . . . I say, do you think I could squeeze into your brougham?"

About to offer to take her home, Delestang seemed quite put out. She was wearing a gown of orange silk worked with such gaudy flowers that all the footmen stared. Rougon had bowed his assent, but they were obliged to wait for his brougham for nearly ten minutes. Everybody waited with them, even Delestang, whose carriage was parked in the first row, only two paces away. The Cathedral was still emptying slowly. M. Kahn and M. Béjuin crossing the square hurried across to join the little group. As the great man shook hands very limply and seemed to be scowling, M. Kahn with anxious solicitude asked him if he felt unwell.

"No, merely tired of all those lights in there," he replied, curtly, then, a moment later, added more calmly: "It was a great occasion. . . . I have never seen such delight on any man's face."

He was speaking of the Emperor, and spread his arms wide, in a generous, leisurely, even majestic gesture, as if to recall the whole scene in the Cathedral, but he said no more, and his friends, grouped about him, were also silent. They now formed a rather conspicuous little gathering in one corner of the square. As it swelled, the crowd pouring out of the church passed by them—judges in robes, officers in parade uniform, officials in uniform, all of them heavy with epaulettes and gold braid and decorations. They trampled on the flowers with which the square was covered, amid bawling footmen and the rumble and clatter as one carriage and another drove off. The splendour of France's Second Empire at its apogee shimmered in the purple of the setting sun, while the towers of *Notre Dame*, rosy-hued and vibrant with sound, seemed to be transporting the future reign of the child baptized under their arches into the heights, towards a pinnacle of peace and greatness. This little group of people, however, was disconsolate. In them the splendour of the ceremony, the pealing of the bells, the display of banners of enthusiastic Paris and all this show of the official world merely gave rise to tremendous envy. It was the first occasion on which Rougon had felt the chill of his fall from favour, and his countenance was white. Deep in his thoughts, he was jealous about the Emperor!

"Goodnight, I'm off, it's too much for me," said Du Poizat, when he had shaken hands all round.

"Whatever's taken you today?" demanded the Colonel. "You're very fierce."

Calmly, the Sub-Prefect gave him a straight answer, as he lingered a moment:

"Well, I'm damned! Whatever reason do you think I have to be cheerful? This morning in my *Moniteur* I read of the appointment of that loony de Campenon to the Prefecture which was promised to me!"

The others exchanged glances. Du Poizat, of course, was right. This was not their party. When the Prince was born, Rougon had promised them a veritable rain of presents on the christening day: M. Kahn was to get his concession, the Colonel the cross of a Commander, Mme. Correur, the five or six tobacco-selling licences she sought, and here they all were, lumped together, in a corner of *Notre Dame* square, pockets empty. They now levelled at Rougon glances so distressed, so full of reproach, that all he could do was heave

up his shoulders in one immense shrug. When at last his brougham did arrive, he simply bundled Clorinda into it, leapt in himself and without a word to anybody banged the door to.

"There's Count de Marsy over there, under the awning," whispered M. Kahn, as he led M. Béjuin away. "Doesn't the bounder look pleased with himself! But do look the other way. He might take advantage and snub us if we bowed."

Delestang had hurried to his own carriage, to follow Rougon's brougham. M. Bouchard waited for his wife, then, when the cathedral was empty, was most astonished to find himself left with the Colonel, who was equally tired of looking for his boy. As for Mme. Correur, she had just accepted the arm of a lieutenant of dragoons from her home country, a young officer who to some extent owed his commission to her.

Meantime, in the brougham, Clorinda was talking to Rougon about the ceremony. She had found it ravishing. Rougon merely lay back, looking drowsy, and let her run on. She had seen the Easter celebrations in Rome, but they were no grander than this. She went on to explain that to her religion was a revelation of a patch of Paradise, with God the Father seated on his throne, like a sort of sun, and, in a large circle of handsome young men clad in gold, all the angels in their glory ranged around him. But all at once she interrupted herself, to cry:

"I wonder if you are coming to the banquet which Paris is giving their Majesties this evening? It will be wonderful!"

She had an invitation. She was going to wear a pink frock covered with forget-me-nots. M. de Plouguern was to take her as her mother did not want to go anywhere in the evening now, because of her migraines. She again interrupted herself to put a new question very suddenly:

"But do tell me, who was that judge you were with just now?" she asked him.

Pricking up his chin, Rougon began to gabble: "M. Beulin-d'Orchère, fifty years old, comes of a family of judges, appointed Deputy Procuror at Montbrison, then Royal Procuror at Orléans, next, Public Prosecutor at Rouen, Member of the Joint Committee of 1852, finally came to Paris as Councillor of the Court of Appeal, and now presides over that court. . . . Oh yes, I was forgetting, he it was confirmed the Decree of January 22nd, 1852, which confiscated the property of the Orléans family. . . . Satisfied?"

Clorinda laughed heartily. He was making fun of her for wanting to learn. But there was nothing wrong in wanting to know the people one might have to meet. And she did not even murmur a word about Mlle. Beulin-d'Orchère, but went back to talking about the Town Hall banquet. The festival hall was to be done out at unheard-of expense, she had heard, and there would be an orchestra to discourse sweet music all through dinner. Oh, France was a great country. Nowhere, not in Britain, not in Germany, not in Spain, not in Italy, had she seen more dazzling balls or more stupendous gala affairs than in France. So, she declared, her countenance aglow with admiration, her choice was now made: she wanted to become a Frenchwoman herself.

"Oh, soldiers," she cried, suddenly, "just look, soldiers!"

The brougham, having followed the *rue de la Cité*, was now held up at the end of the *Notre Dame* bridge by a regiment marching past. They were soldiers of the line, little men trudging along like so many sheep, in rather disorderly fashion, owing to the trees bordering the sidewalks. They were returning from their job of lining the route. Their faces were stamped with the glare of the scorching midday sun, their feet were white with dust, their backs were bent under the burden of haversack and gun, and they were so utterly sick of it all, amid the jostling of the crowds, that they looked just like flabbergasted livestock.

"I simply worship the French army," cried Clorinda, in rapture, leaning out to get a better view.

Rougon seemed to wake up here, and he too peered out. It was the Empire's mainstay that was passing in the dust of Paris's main streets. Gradually a confusion of vehicles began to bunch at the approaches of the bridge, but the drivers were full of respect for the army and waited, while from the carriage doors peered dignitaries in full costume, vague smiles on their faces, their eyes sentimentally watching the little soldiers dazed by their long day of duty. In the sunshine, the rifles gave light to the festival.

"And those there, right at the end, see?" Clorinda chattered away. "There's a whole row of them still beardless. Aren't they darling boys, eh?"

In a frenzy of sentiment, she suddenly began to blow kisses to the soldiers, with both hands, though sitting back rather, to keep herself hidden. It was lovely, they were such sweet soldier boys, thus she could enjoy them all by herself.

Rougon smiled a paternal smile. He too had just had the first moment of pleasure all day.

"But what on earth's going on here?" he demanded, when at last the brougham was able to turn the corner on to the bridge. There was quite a crowd, spreading from pavement to street. Once again the brougham was forced to a stop. Somebody in the crowd shouted:

"It's a drunk who's just insulted the boys, and the police are arresting him."

When a moment later the crowd parted, what did Rougon see but Gilquin, dead drunk, held by the scruff of the neck by a couple of policemen. Splitting at the seams, his yellow duck suit revealed patches of bare flesh, but, with his moustaches dangling down his rubicund cheeks, he was still good-natured enough, and he was talking most tenderly to the police, calling them his "lambs", and explaining to them that he had spent a nice quiet afternoon in a café with some very rich people, they could check up at the *Palais-Royal Theatre*, where M. and Mme. Charbonnel had gone to see the *Dragées du Baptême*, he knew they would not deny it.

"So let me be then, you silly clots!" he cried, suddenly rearing erect. "Hell, the café's right here, only a step away, come along there with me, if you don't believe me. . . . A lot I wanted to bother about the soldiers, I tell you, but there was a little blighter laughed at me, so I told him off, the dribbler. But insult the French army? Never! . . . Just you mention Théodore to the Emperor, you'll see what he'll say. . . . *Sacrebleu*, and wouldn't you look funny then!"

The amused crowd was roaring with laughter. The two policemen were imperturbable. Without letting go for an instant, they slowly urged Gilquin towards the *rue Saint Martin*, some distance down which could be seen the red light of a police station. Rougon had hastily flung himself well back in his brougham, but all at once, Gilquin raised his head and caught sight of him. Then, drunk though he was, he suddenly became wily and circumspect. Screwing his eyes up but yet keeping watch on Rougon, he began to talk at him:

"All right, boys, all right! I could make trouble if I liked, but I won't, I've more sense of dignity than that. . . . But, let me tell you one thing, you wouldn't lay a finger on Théodore if he fiddled about with princesses, like a gentleman of this town whom I happen to know. Perhaps, all the same I too

have worked with fine folk, trick work too, things to boast of, but without insisting on being paid hundreds or thousands. We know what we are worth. Money consoles mean souls. . . . God Almighty, are friends no longer friends?"

He became maudlin, his voice broken by hiccoughs. Discreetly, Rougon beckoned to a man in an overcoat buttoned from top to bottom, whom he knew, whispered something to him, and gave him Gilquin's address, *17, rue Virginie, Grenelle*. The man went over to the two policemen, as if to help them hold the drunk, who was now beginning to struggle, but to the astonishment of the crowd the two policemen now executed a sharp left turn, packed Gilquin into a cab, gave the driver instructions, and watched him drive off along the *Mégisseries* embankment. Gilquin, however, was still to put in another appearance. Enormous, tousled, roaring with triumphant laughter, his head suddenly appeared at the door of the cab, and he yelled:

"Up the Republic!"

When the crowd had dispersed, the embankments resumed their spacious calm. Tired of its enthusiasm, Paris was now busy dining. The three hundred thousand sight-seers who had crushed each other in the streets had now invaded the restaurants on the river embankment and in the *Temple* district. Only country bumpkins, worn out, still dragged their feet along the deserted pavements, ignorant where to go for dinner. Down by the water's edge, on either side of the barge, the washerwomen were still banging away, finishing off their linen, and a ray of sunshine was still gilding the tops of the towers of *Notre Dame*, which now towered silent over the city's architecture, turned sombre by the shade of night. A light mist was rising from the Seine, and in the distance, at the point of the Isle of St. Louis, all one could see standing out from the confused grey of the house-fronts was that giant grey coat, that monumental piece of publicity, hanging on a nail of the horizon, the offcast bourgeois garment of a Titan, whose flesh had been consumed by divine thunder.

CHAPTER FIVE

ONE morning, towards eleven o'clock, Clorinda paid Rougon a call at his house in the *rue Marbeuf*. She was on her way back from riding in the park. At the door, a servant took charge of her horse. She then made her way round the house, to the left, straight into the garden, to appear suddenly at one of the large open windows of the study, which was open. The great man was working.

"Aha! now I've surprised you, haven't I?" she cried.

He looked up with a start, and there stood Clorinda, laughing in the warm June sunshine. Her thick blue riding habit, the long skirts of which she had caught up over her left arm, made her seem even taller than she was, while the bodice which went with it, cut like a waistcoat, close-fitting, with little rounded tails, was like a living skin gloving shoulders, bosom, and hips. She had starched white linen cuffs and a collar to match complete with thin blue silk tie. On her coiled tresses she had very jauntily set a man's hat round which she had wound a muslin scarf, adding a bluish haze which seemed to sparkle with the gold-dust of the sun.

"Good gracious, you!" cried Rougon. He hurried to the window. "But you must come in," he said.

"No," she replied. "No, I won't come in. Don't disturb yourself. I only wanted a word. . . . Mummy'll be expecting me back for lunch."

It was the third time that she had paid Rougon a visit of this sort, in defiance of all convention. But she always demonstratively stayed outside, in the garden. Both times before, moreover, she had been in the same riding kit, a costume which afforded her a masculine liberty, while no doubt, as she saw it, the long skirts were ample protection.

"Do you know," she ran on, "I'm here begging today! I've come about lottery tickets. . . . We've got one up for destitute girls."

"Very well, then come inside," Rougon repeated. "You will have to tell me all about it."

She had retained her riding-crop, a very dainty one, with

elegant silver handle. She laughed again, tapping this crop lightly against her skirt.

"Oh, but that's all there is to tell," she said. "You're going to take some of my tickets. That's what I have come for. . . . I've been looking for you for the past three days without being able to get hold of you, and the draw's tomorrow."

So saying she drew a little note-case from her pocket and put the question:

"How many tickets would you like?"

"Not one, if you don't come inside," he cried. Then, amiably, he added: "Hang it all, do people conduct such business through windows? You don't expect me to hand you out a coin or two, as if you were a real beggar-girl?"

"I don't care, so long as you give something."

But he stuck to it. For a few moments she eyed him without speaking. Then she said:

"If I come in, will you take ten of my tickets? . . . They are ten-francs each."

Even so, she did not make up her mind at once. First she shot a quick glance about her. Down one of the paths, was a gardener, on his knees, planting a bed of geraniums. With a faint smile, she now crossed to the little porch, with its three steps up to the French window leading into the study. Rougon offered her his hand. When he had led her into the room, he murmured:

"What, afraid I should gobble you up? You know very well I am the most obedient of your slaves. . . . What have you to fear here?"

She went on tapping lightly at her skirt with the tip of her riding-crop.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of anything!" she replied, with all the fine indifference of an emancipated young lady.

Then, putting down the riding-crop on a sofa, she fumbled again in her note-case.

"You're taking ten, are you not?"

"I'll take twenty, if you like," he said, "but do please deign to sit down for a moment. Let us have a little talk. . . . You are surely not going to rush away immediately?"

"All right, then. A ticket for every minute, eh? . . . If I stay quarter of an hour, that will be fifteen tickets, if I stay twenty minutes, that will be twenty, and so on till the evening. I'm ready. . . . Is it a bargain?"

They found the arrangement most amusing, and at last did sit down, choosing an armchair in the embrasure of the window that was open. In order not to frighten her, Rougon went back to his desk. They began to chat, first of all about the house. With frequent glances outside, she declared the garden to be rather small, but charming, with its central lawn and the big patches of green of the trees. So he outlined to her the whole lay-out. On the ground floor were his study, one large drawing-room, one smaller one and a very nice dining-room, and the first and second floors had seven rooms each. And although all this made it a relatively small town house, it was much too roomy for him. When the Emperor made him a present of it he was to have married a certain widowed lady who was His Majesty's own choice, but she died, and he had remained a bachelor.

"Why?" she demanded, looking him straight in the face.

"Pooh! Just because I have other things to do," he said.

"At my age one no longer needs a wife."

She merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't be such a *poseur*!" she said.

They had already reached this stage of talking to each other very freely. She would have liked him to be more interested in matters of the flesh. He fought this off, telling her about his youth, the years spent in bare rooms which never saw a good cleaning, he said, with a laugh. Then she countered by enquiring with a childish sort of curiosity about his mistresses. These must have had more of his life. For instance, could he really deny a certain lady, known to all Paris, who when she left him had set up house in the country? He merely shrugged his shoulders. Woman-flesh did not greatly preoccupy him. When he did have a little brainstorm, why, Heavens alive! He was like any other man. In such moments he did not wait for the bedroom door to be opened to him, he was not one to cool his heels negotiating outside, he put his shoulder to the wood, but when the storm was over, he was very quiet again.

"No, thank you," he repeated, though in the same instant there was a glint in eye, the free-and-easy posture which Clorinda had assumed. "Takes up too much of a man's time," he said.

Sprawling with complete abandon in the deep armchair, Clorinda smiled a peculiar smile. On her features was a raptured expression. Her respiration was slow and deep. She

suddenly began to speak in a sing-song fashion, exaggerating her Italian accent.

"Don't keep telling me that story, my dear," she said. "You are a great woman lover. And I'll bet you you'll be married within the year. Will you take it on?"

She really was rather annoying, she seemed so sure of winning. For some time she had been quite blandly offering herself to Rougon. She no longer even troubled to mask this slow effort at seduction, this love campaign with which she was trying to enclose him, before the final frontal attack on his heart. She now felt him sufficiently won, indeed, to proceed without further concealment. A veritable never-ceasing duel had begun between them. Though they had never explicitly agreed on the terms of this struggle, things said and the light in the eyes of them both had amounted to remarkably frank avowals on either side. They could neither of them restrain a smile, as they faced up to one another, and their eyes met. Clorinda was setting her price, moving steadily on towards her goal with an effrontery which was superb, and always confident of not giving more than she wished. Heady with it, goaded, Rougon thrusting all scruples aside, merely dreamt of making this lovely girl his mistress, after which just to demonstrate his superiority to her, he would jettison her. It was thus more a contest of one pride against another than of sentiment.

"In my country," she continued, in almost an undertone, "love is the great occupation. Flappers of twelve years old have their admirers. . . . But I was just the opposite, because I have travelled and seen the world. If only you had known Mother, when she was young! She was such a beauty that men travelled far to see her. There was one Count spent six months in Milan without even succeeding in getting a glimpse of the tip of her pigtails. The fact is, Italian women are not like Frenchwomen, all talk and gadding about, they pick on their man and cling to him. . . . Yes, I've been about the world. I don't know how much has stuck in my memory, though, and in spite of it I sometimes think I shall some day love very passionately, oh, terribly passionately, mortally. . . ."

Her eyelids had gradually curtained her eyes, her whole countenance absorbed in a great wave of sentiment. While she was speaking, Rougon had got up from his desk. His hands were shaking, as if under the attraction of a superior force. But when he was quite near her she suddenly opened her eyes

wide. She stared up at him without a trace of emotion. With a smile, she pointed to the clock, and switched the conversation back to her tickets.

"That makes ten!" she cried.

"What on earth do you mean?" he stammered. For the moment he could not follow her. "Ten what?"

When he did grasp what she meant, there were peals of laughter. She loved to work him up like that, then with one word the moment he was about to take her in his arms, slip right out of his grasp. It seemed to afford her great fun, but this time Rougon turned very pale and glared at her, though only to increase her delight still more.

"Now, now!" she murmured. "I'm just going. You are too blunt to be a ladies' man. . . . No, really, I must be going, Mummy's expecting me for lunch."

But he had already recovered his paternal manner. When she turned to him, his grey eyes under their heavy lids flashed fire, and he swept her with a glance with all the pent-up fury of a man who has had about enough and has made up his mind to have a show-down. She might well give him another five minutes, he told her, meanwhile. She had caught him in the middle of a very tiresome piece of work. It was a statement to the Senate, about some applications. He went on to speak of the Empress. Clorinda assured him that she simply adored her. She had gone down to Biarritz for a week.

Clorinda had by now sunk luxuriously back again into her armchair and the small-talk ran on endlessly. She knew Biarritz, she had once stayed there, years ago, before it became a fashionable watering-place. She regretted terribly not being able to pay another visit, while the Court was there. That led on to her telling him about a sitting of the Academy to which M. de Plouguern had taken her, the day before. It was the inauguration of a writer, and she was very scornful about him because he was bald. In any case, she had a horror of books. If she did make herself read, it always brought her to bed in the end, with a nervous attack. She never understood what she read. When Rougon told her that the writer inaugurated the day before was full of hateful innuendoes, she stared, very taken aback.

"But. . . . But. . . . All the same. . . . He looked rather a nice man," she cried.

Now it was Rougon's turn to fulminate against books. In

particular, there was a novel that had just appeared which had outraged him, a work of imagination of the utmost depravity, which, while pretending to be concerned with the exact truth, introduced the reader to the ravings of an hysterical woman. The word *hysterical* seemed to please him, for he repeated it three times more, but when Clorinda asked him exactly what he meant by it, he was overcome with great modesty and refused to tell her.

"Everything can be said," he went on. "Only, there are ways of doing it. . . . It is the same in Government work, the most indelicate subject matters often come one's way. For example, I have read reports on certain women. You see what I mean? Yes, but in those reports the most precise details were set down in a manner which was clear, unadorned, merely frank. In short, it was all completely clean. . . . Whereas our novel-writers today have adopted a lubricious style, a manner of saying things which brings them to life before your eyes. They call that 'art'. It is just impropriety, nothing less."

He also used the word *pornography*, and went so far as to mention the Marquis de Sade, though for that matter he had never read that writer's work. Nor did this diatribe prevent his contriving, with great skill, as he spoke, to get behind Clorinda's chair without her noticing it. Dreamy-eyed, she murmured:

"Well, I don't read novels at all. I never opened one. Ridiculous, all that fabrication. . . . But *Leonora the Gypsy Maid*—do you know it? Now that is a lovely book! I read it in Italian when I was ever so little. It's all about a girl who marries a duke in the end. But first she's captured by brigands. . . ."

Here a faint creak at her back made her turn round with a start, as if suddenly awakened.

"What on earth are you doing?" she demanded.

"Only lowering the blind," Rougon replied. "The sun will be getting in your eyes."

She was indeed in the direct line of the sunlight, the dust haze of which had lapped the tight-drawn cloth of her habit with a luminous, gilded down.

"Please leave that blind alone!" she cried. "Why, I adore the sun! It's like having a bath!"

Quite alarmed, she half raised herself, and peered out of the window to make sure that the gardener was still about. When

she picked him out, now bent down on the far side of the bed, she was reassured and sank back into the chair, with a smile. Rougon had followed her glance. He left the blind. She began to tease him. He was like the owls, was he, he liked the dark? But Rougon kept his temper. He crossed to the centre of the room, without revealing the least annoyance. But his massive frame had the sluggishness of a bear plotting some new move. He went on, to the far end of the study, where a large photograph hung above a divan, and called to her.

"Come and look here," he said. "Don't you recognize my latest portrait?"

She snuggled deeper into her chair. Still smiling, she replied:

"I can see it quite well from here. . . . Besides, you showed it me once before."

He did not lose heart. He had drawn the blind on the other window. He now tried, two or three times, to find a pretext to draw her into that discreetly shaded corner. He said it was more comfortable there. Scorning that clumsy trap, however, she did not even deign to reply, merely shook her head in refusal. Then, realizing that she had seen through him, he came back and stood in front of her, hands clasped. Abandoning any attempt to be wily any more, he challenged her directly.

"I quite forgot," he said. . . . "I meant to show you my new horse, Monarch. I exchanged another for him, you know. . . . As a horse-lover, you really must give me your opinion."

She refused this bait too. But he insisted. The stable was only a couple of yards away. It would not keep her more than five minutes. Then, since she kept on saying no, in an undertone, almost scornfully, he ejaculated:

"Now, that's rather poor of you!"

It was like the crack of a whip. She sat up straight at once, grave and rather pale.

"Let us go and see Monarch, then," she said.

No more than that. She caught up the tails of her habit over her left arm and stared him straight in the face. For some instants they gazed into each other's eyes so deeply that they read each other's thoughts, then she started out down the steps, while, mechanically, he buttoned the indoor jacket he was wearing. But she had not gone three steps down the path when she stopped short.

"Just a moment."

She went back to the study. When she reappeared, her

riding-crop was lightly poised on her finger-tips. She had forgotten it, behind a cushion on the sofa. Rougon glanced at it askance, then, slowly raising his eyes, looked at her. But she was smiling now. She led the way again.

The stables were at the far end of the garden, to the right. When they passed the gardener he was gathering his tools together, on the point of leaving. Rougon drew out his watch. It was five minutes past eleven. The groom too would be at his lunch. Bareheaded in the blazing sunlight, he followed Clorinda, who strode undisturbedly ahead, whipping at the foliage of the shrubs to either side as she went. Not a word passed between them. She did not look round once. When they reached the stable door, she waited for him to open this for her, then immediately entered. Once inside, he gave the door rather too hard a push and it banged, but Clorinda did not cease to smile. Her expression was frank and supremely trusting.

It was a very ordinary stable, quite small, just four walls of oak planking. Though the tiles had been sluiced down that morning and all the woodwork—the hay-rack and the manger—were spotlessly maintained, there was a strong odour, and the damp heat of a bathroom. Entering by two circular lights, the daylight cut across the shadows of the ceiling with two pale bars, yet without lighting the dark corners at ground level. With her eyes full of the brilliance of the day outside, Clorinda at first could make nothing out, but she did not open the door again. She waited, with no hint of apprehension. Only two boxes of the stable were occupied. The horses turned their heads and snuffled.

"It's this fellow, isn't it?" she asked, when her eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom. "He looks a fine beast."

She patted the animal's cruppers lightly, then slipped into his box, brushing his flanks as she did so, without the least sign of fear. She said she wanted to have a look at the animal's head. When she reached it, Rougon heard her plant smacking kisses on the horse's nostrils. Those kisses exasperated him.

"Do come out of there! Please!" he insisted. "If he shies, you'll be crushed."

But she only laughed and kissed the animal harder than ever, petting him with extravagantly sentimental language, and all this unexpected fondling seemed to delight the animal. Faint ripples ran over its silky skin. At last she came out,

assuring Rougon that she really was very fond indeed of horses and very well they knew it, too, they never hurt her, even when she teased them. She knew how to handle them. They were very ticklish creatures, but this one seemed most docile. She crouched down behind it and raised one leg, to examine the shoe, and the horse offered no resistance to her handling.

Rougon stood staring at the floor. When she stooped down her hind-quarters completely filled the voluminous folds of her skirts. He did not utter a word. The blood had mounted to his throat, but he was suddenly seized with that timidity which rough characters can feel. Nevertheless, in the end he did bend down. She felt something brush under her armpits, but so lightly that she went on examining the horse's hoof. Breathing hard, Rougon advanced his hands, but still, as if she had expected this, she did not flinch at all, but, letting the hoof go, without even turning round, merely asked:

"What on earth is the matter? What has come over you?"

He tried to close his arms round her, but there came a rain of little flicks of the riding-crop across his fingers, and she said:

"No, hands off, please! I am like the horses, you know—ticklish. . . . Aren't you a silly!"

She laughed, as if she really did not understand what it was all about, but the instant she felt Rougon's breath on her throat, she straightened up with the tautness of a steel spring, slipped out of his grasp, and got her back up against the wall, opposite the horse-boxes. He followed her, hands outstretched, trying to get what he could from her, but she transformed the tails of her habit, wrapped about her left arm, into a shield, while in her right she brandished the riding-crop. His lips quivered, he did not utter a word, while, as if really quite unconcerned, she babbled on:

"You're not going to touch me, you know! When I was young, I had fencing-lessons. I am rather sorry I did not go on with them. So look out for your fingers. . . . There, what did I tell you?"

She seemed to be playing. She did not hit hard. It was just fun to flick his skin lightly, each time he ventured his hands forward. She was so quick with her strokes that he did not even succeed in touching her clothing. He first tried to take hold of her shoulders, then, after another stroke, rather treacherously, to get a hold as low as her knee, but he was not swift enough to avoid a hail of light strokes which forced him

upright again. Left and right, down they rained. The tip-tap of them echoed clearly in the stable.

Under that tattoo, with his skin burning, Rougon fell back a step or two. He was now very red, and beads of sweat were beginning to stand out on his temples. The acrid odour of the stable intoxicated him and those shadows, full of their animal reek, encouraged him to risk everything. Then the game suddenly changed. He leapt at Clorinda and attacked her roughly, whereupon, still without ceasing to laugh and chatter, she no longer restrained herself to friendly little taps, but lashed out hard, blow after blow, with deliberation, harder and harder. She was very beautiful thus, her skirts pressed close against her legs, and her supple loins revealed by the clinging bodice. She was like a nimble blackish-blue snake. Whenever she raised her whip to strike, the line of her drawn-back bosom was full of grace.

"Come now," she cried, laughing, "have you finished? It's you who will tire the first, my dear boy."

These however were her last words. Maddened, scarlet, terrifying, Rougon charged at her, breathing as hoarsely as a mad, runaway bull. Full of enjoyment, beating this man, she had eyes flaring with new light, a gleam of cruelty. Now she too had no breath to speak. Leaving the wall, with a superb gesture she stepped forward into the middle of the stable and, whirling round and round, began to strike out with increasing fury, just keeping her distance and getting in blows in turn on legs, arms, body, shoulders, while, a ponderous figure, he pranced foolishly about, like an animal under the trainer's lash. She brought her blows lashing down on him, as if she had grown taller, and was proud of it, her cheeks pale, only a highly-strung smile on her lips. And yet, without her noticing it, he was gradually urging her backwards, to an open door which led into an inner section of the stables which served as store-room for straw and hay. Then, in a moment when she was preoccupied with keeping her crop out of his reach, because he seemed to be trying to get hold of it, despite her blows he gripped her thighs and tipped her through that doorway, on to the straw, and with such force that he came tumbling by her side. She did not utter a sound, but with all her force, full swing, lashed her whip across his cheeks, from one ear to the other.

"You little bitch!" he cried, coughing and choking and

letting out a stream of oaths. He now abandoned every trace of ceremony with her and told her he knew quite well that she had slept with all and sundry, with the coachman and the banker and with Pozzo, so why, he wanted to know, why not with him too?

She did not attempt to offer a reply. She had got to her feet, and now stood facing him, white as a sheet, but haughty and impassive as a statue.

"Why won't you?" he asked again. "Remember when you let me fondle your naked arms? . . . All I want to know is, why won't you?"

She remained grave, above insults, a distant look in her eyes.

"Because I won't," she said, at last.

She gazed at him. There was a silence. Then she said:

"Marry me. . . . Then you can have all you want."

He laughed, a constrained laugh, a laugh which was both stupid and wounding, and which he accompanied by a shake of the head.

"Then it's never!" she cried. "Understand? Never! Never!"

They did not say another word about it. They went back into the stable. Breathing harder, made uneasy by the sounds of struggling which they had heard behind their backs, the horses in their boxes turned their heads. The sun struck full on the two window lights, and two yellow shafts thrust a dazzling dust of illumination into the stable. Where the rays struck the floor, the tiles were steaming, and the odour was stronger than before. Quite calm, Clorinda suddenly tucked her crop under her arm and slipped past Monarch again into his box. Planting a couple of kisses on the horse's nostrils, she said:

"Goodbye, big beastie. You're well behaved, you are."

Though broken and shamefaced, Rougon now felt great peace. That final blow of the riding-crop seemed to have satisfied his flesh. With fingers which still shook a little he re-knotted his tie and felt down his coat to see it was all buttoned. Then he was astonished at himself, for he proceeded painstakingly to pick pieces of straw from her riding habit. Now a fear of being found in here with her made him strain his ears. Meanwhile, as if nothing unusual had passed between them, Clorinda let him circle round her skirts, without the least concern. When she asked him to open the door for her to leave, he obeyed her.

Out in the garden they walked slowly. Rougon held a handkerchief to his left cheek, which smarted. But when they reached the study threshold, Clorinda's first glance was at the clock.

"That makes thirty-two tickets," she said, with a smile.

When he swung round in astonishment, she laughed louder, and went on:

"Hurry up and get rid of me! The clock's hands never stop, the thirty-third minute has already begun. . . . Look, I'll put the tickets on your desk."

Without a moment of hesitation, he gave her three hundred and twenty francs, his fingers merely a trifle unsteady as he counted out the gold pieces. He was punishing himself. And now, in sheer delight that he should pay out so large a sum so lightly, with an adorable gesture of self-abandon she went up to him, and held him her cheek. When he had planted a fatherly kiss on it, she took her departure. She was beside herself with delight.

"Thank you on behalf of the destitute girls," she said. "That leaves only seven tickets to sell, and those Godfather'll take."

When Rougon was alone, he mechanically resumed his place at his desk and took up the interrupted work. He wrote for some minutes, with concentrated study of the documents spread out before him. Then, letting the pen rest between his fingers, he began to stare gravely out into the garden, through the open window, but seeing nothing. All he could make out in the space was the slender silhouette of Clorinda. It seemed to sway there, coiling up and uncoiling again with all the soft sensual grace of a snake. The vision rose in the air and filtered into the study. When it reached the centre of the room, it reared on the live tail of its gown, its thighs quivering, its arms reaching out, slithering through the air on lissom segments till the fingers touched him. Little by little, traits of her person invaded the whole room, spreading everywhere, over floor and furniture, over the wallpaper, soundless but impassioned, and exuding a harsh odour.

Then Rougon flung down his pen and angrily left the study, cracking his finger-joints as he went. Was that girl going to hamper his working now? Was he even going out of his mind, seeing things which were not, he who was so level-headed? To his mind came a woman he had known long ago, when he was

a student. Living with her, he had been able to write all night without even hearing her breathe once.

He raised the blind, opened this other window wide, then kicked the door violently open, to make a draught, as if he were choking there. With the exasperated gesture he might have used to chase away a wasp which threatened him, he began to fan with his handkerchief, striving to drive out the odour of Clorinda. When at last he could no longer smell her, he heaved a loud, gasping sigh, then wiped his face with the handkerchief, to remove the burning smart that stalwart young woman had planted there.

Despite all this, he was still unable to complete the page begun. Slowly, he strode up and down the study. When he happened once to glance in the mirror, he saw the red weal on his left cheek. He went to the glass to examine it. The whip had only slightly broken the skin. That could be explained away as an accident. But though the skin itself scarcely showed this faint red line, once again, deep in his flesh, he felt the burning smart of the stroke which had cut his cheek. Hurrying to the toilet cabinet behind a curtain, he dipped his head in a bowl of water, and that eased him very greatly. He was afraid lest that stroke that Clorinda had given him should make him want her still more. He was afraid to think about her till that little graze on his cheek was quite healed. The heat engendered there penetrated his every limb.

"No, I will not!" he told himself, out loud, as he left the cabinet. "After all, it is just too silly."

He had sat down on the sofa, his fists clenched. A servant entered to tell him that lunch was getting cold, but did not succeed in extracting him from his deep meditation of a man wrestling with his own flesh. His hard features were swollen with the inner effort. His bull neck was bursting, the muscles tense, as if in grim silence he was in process of choking to death some beast in his very bowels which was gnawing at his flesh. The battle lasted ten long minutes. He could not remember ever having had to fight so hard. He emerged from the struggle pallid, his throat wet with sweat.

For two whole days, Rougon would see nobody. He was deep, he said, in a very big piece of work. One whole night he did not go to bed at all. On three more occasions his servant found him prostrate on the sofa, as if stupefied, on his face a terrible expression. On the evening of the second day, he

dressed, to go to see Delestang, with whom he was to dine, but instead of crossing the *Champs-Élysées* to Delestang's house, he turned up the Avenue, to the de Balbis'. It was still only six o'clock.

"Mademoiselle is not at home," said the little maid, Antonia, meeting him on the stairs with her swarthy, nanny-goat grin.

He raised his voice, to make himself heard, and was just wondering if after all he would not have to leave, when Clorinda appeared at the head of the stairs, leaning over the balusters.

"But do come up!" she cried. "What a ninny that girl is! She never understands the orders she gets."

She introduced him to a narrow room on the first floor, next to her bedroom. It was a dressing-room, with a wallpaper showing delicate blue foliage. The room was furnished with a huge bureau off which the veneer had begun to flake, a leather armchair, and a filing-cabinet. Piles of papers thick with dust lay about. It might have been the room of a shady lawyer. She had to go to her bedroom for another chair.

"I've been expecting you," she cried, while she was getting it.

When she had brought the chair, she explained that she was busy with her correspondence, and on the desk she showed him large sheets of buff paper covered with large, rounded writing. Then, as Rougon sat down, she realized that he was dressed in formal black clothes.

"Have you come to propose to me?" she asked, excitedly.

"Right first time!" he said, then with a smile added: "But not on my own behalf—on that of one of my friends."

She shot him an uncertain glance, not quite clear whether or not he was joking. She was grubby and unkempt, in a badly fastened house coat, but in spite of this she was lovely, with that powerful beauty of hers as of an ancient statue that had found its way into a junk shop. Then, apparently lost in thought, sucking at a finger on which she had just made a blot, she peered at the slight scar still to be seen on Rougon's left cheek. At last, *sotto voce*, with a far-off air, she murmured:

"Yes, I was sure you would come. Only I expected you sooner."

Only then she seemed to remember what he had just said, and resumed their conversation, in a normal tone of voice.

"So you've come to speak for a friend, have you? Your dearest friend of all no doubt?"

Her lovely laughter suddenly rang out. She was now quite sure that Rougon was talking about himself. She felt a desire to lay her finger to that scar on his cheek, just to be completely sure that she had marked him, and now he belonged to her. But Rougon seized her wrists and gently forced her back into the leather chair.

"Shall we have a frank talk?" he said. "You and I are good friends, aren't we? Agree? . . . Very well, then. I have been thinking things over a lot, since the day before yesterday. And all the time, I was imagining you. . . . Picturing you and me married, three months after the wedding. . . . And I wonder if you know what I saw us both doing?"

She made no reply. However unabashed she could be, she was now rather embarrassed.

"I saw you by the fireside. You had taken the shovel, but I had grabbed the tongs, and we were destroying each other."

This seemed so funny to her that she lay back in her chair and laughed hilariously.

"No, do not laugh," he went on, "I am deadly serious. It would not be worth while joining our two lives just to beat each other to death. I assure you, that is what it would come to. Blows, then separation. . . . Never forget: one should never try to unite two wills."

"And so?" she asked, now very grave.

"And so I think we shall be acting very wisely if we shake each other's hands and maintain no more than warm friendship one for the other."

She was speechless, her eyes, those wide-staring black eyes, held by his. Her outraged goddess forehead was gashed by a terrible furrow. Her lips quivered slightly, stammering with mute scorn.

"Will you excuse me?" she said.

Drawing the armchair up to the desk, she began to fold her letters. Like a government office, she used large grey envelopes, which she sealed with wax. She lit a candle. She watched the wax flaring. Rougon calmly waited for her to finish.

"And that is why you came here?" she resumed, at last, still sealing letters.

Now it was his turn not to answer. He wanted to see her full face. When at last she consented to turn her chair back

towards him, he smiled at her and tried to meet her eyes. Then, as if anxious to disarm her, he kissed her hand. She maintained the same haughty chill.

"You know very well," he said, "that I am here to ask your hand for one of my friends."

He spoke at great length. He was fonder of her than she realized. He liked her most of all for her intelligence and her strength. It cost him a lot to give her up, but he was sacrificing his heart to the happiness of them both. He wanted her to be a queen in her own home. He saw her married to a very rich man with whom she could do what she liked, and she would be the mistress, she would not have to yield one bit of her personality. Was that not better than their paralysing each other? They were people who could say such things frankly. He ended by calling her "child". She was his wilful child, a person whose delight in intrigues delighted him. It would have been a great grief to him to have seen her fail to make a success of life.

"Is that all," she asked, when at last he was silent.

She had heard him out with the keenest attention, and now, looking up, straight at him, she replied:

"If you're finding me a husband so you can have me, I'll warn you that you are miscalculating. . . . I said *never!*"

"What a thought!" he cried, colouring slightly.

Clearing his throat, he took a paper-knife that was on the desk and began to examine the handle, so she might not see how upset he was. But she was unconcerned with what he was feeling. She was thinking it over for herself.

"And who is the husband?" she murmured, at last.

"Guess!"

Her fingers tapped the desk. She shrugged her shoulders and contrived a faint smile. She knew very well who it was.

"He's such a fool!" she almost whispered.

Rougon defended Delestang. He was a very decent fellow, he said, and she could make whatever she wanted of him. He gave her details of Delestang's health, his wealth, his habits. What was more, he promised to back them, both her and him, with all his influence, if he ever returned to power. No doubt Delestang was not exactly a clever man, but on the other hand he would not be out of place in any situation.

"Oh, he meets the bill, I'll give you that," she cried, with an easy laugh.

Then, after a fresh silence, she said:

"Good Lord, I'm far from saying no, you may have the right idea. . . . M. Delestang is not displeasing to me."

As she made this latter declaration, she watched him. She had often had the impression that he was jealous of Delestang. But not a tremor was to be seen on his countenance. There was no doubt about it, his grasp of himself had proved powerful enough to annihilate his desires in a couple of days. What was more, he even seemed to be carried away now by the success of the step he was taking. Indeed, he began again to outline to her all the advantages of such a union. He might have been a wily lawyer dealing with an investment which was exceptionally advantageous for her. He had now taken her hands in his and was patting them with great affection and an air of happy conspiracy.

"It came to me during the night," he repeated. "Suddenly I saw it clearly: it would save us both! . . . For the last thing I want is to see you remain unmarried! You are the only woman I know who really does deserve a husband. Delestang meets the book. If you marry Delestang, we both have a completely free hand." To which he added brightly: "I am quite sure you will reward me by letting me be present at the great doings."

"By the way, does M. Delestang know what you're planning?" she asked, suddenly.

For an instant he was quite taken aback, as if by a slip of the tongue she had said something he would never have expected of her. Then, quite calmly, he replied:

"No, it would serve no purpose. He can be told later."

For the past few moments she had returned to sealing her letters. She embossed the wax with a big seal without initials, then turned each envelope over and in her large handwriting slowly inscribed the address. As she tossed the ready letters over on her right, Rougon tried to make out to whom she was writing. Most of the letters were to very well known Italian politicians. She must have noticed his indiscreetness, for when she rose to take the mail out to the letter-box, she remarked:

"Whenever Mummy has one of her migraines, I have to do the correspondence."

Left alone, Rougon walked about the little room. Like that of any man of business, the filing cabinet had its labels. He read them: *Receipts, Letters to be filed, "A" File*. . . . But he

smiled to find, among the official-looking papers on the desk, a rather threadbare corset, some of its whalebone broken. There was also a cake of soap on the inkstand, and there were fragments of blue satin on the floor, remnants of some petticoat-mending operation that the household had neglected to sweep up. The bedroom door was ajar and he was inquisitive enough to peer inside, but the Venetian blinds were closed and it was so dark that all he could make out was the dense shadow cast by the bed curtains. Clorinda returned.

"Well, I'll be going now," he said. "I am dining with our man tonight. Will you give me a free hand?"

She made no response. She had come back profoundly downcast, as if she had changed her mind coming up the stairs. His hand was already on the balusters to descend, but she drew him inside again and closed the door. The fact was, this was the fading out of her great dream, of a hope so assiduously cultivated that only an hour before she had thought the thing a certainty. Her cheeks were burning now from her deep sense of the gravest injury. She felt as if she had been slapped.

"Then you really mean this?" she demanded, standing with her back to the light, so that he might not see how flushed her cheeks were.

And when for the third time he ran through his reasons, she was speechless, afraid lest, if she tried to argue, the fury which she could already feel fulminating in her bones would take possession of her. She was afraid she might fly at him. Thus seeing the life she had already planned for herself collapse, she then lost her clear sight of reality and, falling back to the door of her bedroom, was on the point of drawing Rougon into it and crying: "*Come, take me, I will trust you, I will only become your wife if you want it.*" But Rougon, still explaining, suddenly realized all this. His lips closed firmly and he was very pale. Clorinda and he looked into each other's eyes, and for some moments they both shivered slightly, uncertain what to do. Yes, there it was, the bed he had just looked at, close at hand, in the deep shadow of those curtains. But she herself was already calculating the consequences such generosity would have. Neither gave way for more than a minute.

"You really want this marriage?" she asked him, slowly.

Without hesitation, speaking very firmly, he said:

"I do."

"Right. Then go ahead with it!"

Slowly, both turned to the door, emerged on to the landing apparently quite calm, except that on Rougon's temples stood out the heavy beads of sweat which this latest victory of his had cost him. Clorinda drew herself erect, sure now of her own strength. For an instant they stood facing each other, without a word. There was nothing more to be said, and yet they could not part. When at last he did turn to go, crushing her hand in his, she held him for but a second with suddenly firmer grasp, then, without a trace of anger, said:

"You think you are stronger than I am. . . . You are wrong. . . . One day you may regret this."

This was her only threat. She leant on the balusters, to watch him go down. When he reached the bottom he looked up, and they smiled at each other. There was no thought of petty vengeance in her. What she now dreamt of was a victory of victories. As she went back into the dressing-room she was astonished to hear herself murmur: *No matter! All roads lead to Rome.*

That very evening Rougon began his assault on Delestang's heart. He recounted some very flattering things which he maintained Clorinda de Balbi had said about him at the city banquet on the christening day, and after that moment he was tireless in his efforts to convince the former lawyer of the extraordinary beauty of this girl. Now, having formerly always been warning Delestang to beware of the women, he worked hard to be able to deliver the man, bound and powerless, into her hands. One day it would be Clorinda's hands that were so peerless, another day he praised her figure, speaking of it with provocative frankness. Very soon Delestang, who was extremely impressionable and already definitely attracted by Clorinda, was all afire with an unreasoning infatuation, and once Rougon had assured him that he himself had never for a moment contemplated marrying her, he confessed to having been in love with her for the past six months, but having suppressed his feelings because he had not wished to cross Rougon's bows. Now he began to run round to see Rougon every evening, just to talk about her. He might well have been the centre of a plot, because now he could not talk to anyone without hearing enthusiastic praise of this girl he worshipped. Even the Charbonnels stopped him one morning as he was crossing the *Place de la Concorde*, to hold forth at great length about how they admired "that lovely young lady with whom you are always to be seen".

For her part, Clorinda produced smiles of ravishing sweetness. She had now re-planned her life anew, and in a few days was quite accommodated to her new part. With a brilliant sense of tactics, she made no attempt to win the ex-lawyer with that dashing directness that she had tried on Rougon. She was a new woman, she became languishing, with all the demonstrative bursts of enthusiasm of an utterly inexperienced young lady, made herself out to be terribly sensitive, so much so indeed that she could be bowled over merely by a sentimental handshake. When Delestang reported to Rougon that she had fainted into his arms when he once made so bold as to kiss her wrist, the latter saw in this proof of great purity of soul. Then, one July evening, seeing that it was all proceeding too slowly, Clorinda, suddenly overcome by her emotions, just like any schoolgirl, yielded Delestang everything. He was not a little dazed by his triumph, especially as he imagined he had rather outrageously taken advantage of an adolescent girl's black-out. After the act, she was like a dead thing and, so it seemed, utterly oblivious of what had happened. Whenever he tried either to seek forgiveness or take a liberty, there was such an innocent expression in her eyes that, consumed with mingled remorse and desire, he would be reduced to stammering. But anyway, after this incident he did begin seriously to think of marriage, seeing in this the way to make amends for taking such shabby advantage of her. Even more, however, he saw in marriage the way to legitimate possession of that stolen bliss, that momentary bliss the memory of which burned him, but he despaired of achieving again in any other way.

Nevertheless, it still took Delestang a whole week more to make up his mind to it. He went to Rougon to ask him. And when at last Rougon surmised what had actually happened, he sat for some time, quite downcast, trying to get to fathom the enigma of womankind, the enduring resistance which Clorinda had shown him, then this sudden collapse into the arms of a nincompoop like Delestang. For a moment, so physical was the hurt, that he felt an urge to be blunt and was on the point of abusing Delestang with many an insult and telling him the whole truth. However, when he probed Delestang with blunt questions that good fellow was very loyal and denied ever having been in any way intimate with Clorinda and this was enough to pull Rougon together again. After that, he very soon succeeded, with considerable skill, in

making the ex-lawyer make up his mind. He did not openly advise Delestang to marry her, he merely edged the man into it by a series of reflections that had scarcely anything to do with the matter. Harking back to those scandalous stories which he said he believed were told about the Countess, he observed that he must admit that they astonished him no end, he certainly gave them no credence himself. Why, he had even made special enquiries, but had unearthed nothing which was not to the honour of Clorinda's mother. Of course, he then added, all this did not in any way affect the fact that in any case the woman one loved was above discussion. This clinched it.

Six weeks later, emerging from the *Madeleine*, where the marriage had been performed with very great splendour, Rougon's remark to a deputy who expressed his astonishment at Delestang's choice was:

"Well, well! Of course, I warned the fellow a hundred times. . . . But he was bound to be caught by some woman."

Towards the end of the winter, when Delestang and his wife were returning from a tour of Italy, they learned that Rougon was about to marry Mlle. Beulin-d'Orchère. When they went to see him, Clorinda congratulated him with impeccable good grace, while he with bonhomie made out that he was of course merely getting married to please his friends. For the past three months they had been on at him, arguing that a man in his position needed a wife. Laughing, he added that it was quite true, when he had friends in in the evening, he did lack somebody to pour out for him.

"You mean it was all a sudden whim," said Clorinda, with a smile. "You had not thought of it previously. But you ought to have got married when we did. We could have taken an Italian honeymoon together."

She went on to ask him all sorts of questions laughingly, of course. She supposed it was his friend Du Poizat who had thought of it. He assured her that she was mistaken. On the contrary, he told her, Du Poizat had been positively opposed to the match. The former Sub-Prefect could not stand the sight of M. Beulin-d'Orchère. All the rest of the band, however, M. Kahn, M. Béjuin, Mme. Correur, even the Charbonnells, could not sufficiently sing Mdlle. Beulin-d'Orchère's praises. To listen to them, she was going to endow the *rue Marbeuf* establishment with great qualities to his house,

fortune of all kinds, unheard-of graces. He wound up by making a laugh of it all.

"The fact is, she was made expressly for me, you see, how then could I say no?" To which he added slyly: "Besides, if we're to have war this autumn, it was high time I made some alliances."

Clorinda expressed lively approval. She too had much to say in praise of Mlle. Beulin-d'Orchère, although she had only set eyes on her once. This was a signal for Delestang, who up to this point had been content merely to nod his head, without once taking his eyes off his wife, to launch forth into further enthusiastic remarks about the union. He then began to talk about his own happiness, but at that point Clorinda suddenly got up and reminded him that they had another call to make. Letting her husband go on ahead, she held Rougon back a moment as he saw them to the door.

"Didn't I tell you you would be married before the year was out," she breathed softly into his ear.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMER arrived. Rougon was living a life of absolute peace. In three months his wife had completely sobered the *rue Marbeuf* house and purged it of its aura of adventure. Now, the rooms were redolent of decent living, and if rather chilly, were very clean, with the furniture all just so and the curtains drawn so as to admit only a narrow cleft of daylight. In addition, pile carpeting, which silenced all footsteps, produced an almost religious sense of restraint, as if one were in the parlour of a convent—except, indeed, that all this had an air of long establishment. One might be setting foot in a very old-world home, where the patriarchal spirit dominated everything. To this atmosphere of retreat ever watchful, tall and plain Mme. Rougon added the gentle spirit of her own silent tread, conducting Rougon's household with such unobtrusive ease that one might have thought that she had grown up there, from childhood, or had at least twenty years of married life behind her.

Whenever people made flattering remarks about the change, a smile came to Rougon's lips. With great obstinacy, he maintained that he had made this marriage purely on the advice and by the choice of his friends. For that matter, his wife was a delight to him. Long since, he said, he had craved for good middle-class home comforts—which was a sort of concrete proof how steady he really was. It was the final act of his shedding of an obscure past. It gave him the stamp of social respectability. He had after all remained essentially provincial, his ideal still being certain well-to-do parlours he had seen in his youth at Plassans, rooms the armchairs of which spent the whole year round under dust-covers. Whenever he visited the Delestangs, where Clorinda insisted on maintaining most outrageously luxurious standards, he would register his scorn with a slight shrug of the shoulders. Nothing seemed so silly to him as to throw money away. Not that he was miserly. But he would always insist that he knew pleasures much greater than any that money can buy. That was why he

passed the management of their budget to his wife. Hitherto he had lived without regard to expense. From now on Mme. Véronique Rougon administered the family funds with the same niggling care as that with which she ran the kitchen.

For the first few months, Rougon was in retreat, a recluse, getting ready for the new struggles of which he dreamed. With him it was love of power for sheer power's sake, a love, what is more, untrammelled by any craving for personal glory or wealth or honours. Shockingly ignorant and terribly mediocre in all but the management of other men, it was only by his need to dominate others that he really rose to any height. He loved the mere effort of it, and worshipped his own ability. Being superior to the mass of men, in whom he saw either fools or rascals, and leading them all by a series of tricks had developed an astonishingly vigorous quick-wittedness, which had permeated his turgid flesh. He believed exclusively in himself; where another saw reasons, Rougon possessed convictions; he subordinated everything to the incessant aggrandisement of his own ego. Despite being utterly devoid of real self-indulgence, he nevertheless indulged in secret orgies of supreme power. To his father he owed those square, massive shoulders, and that puffiness of his countenance, his mother, that virago Félicité Rougon who ruled Plassans, had bequeathed a burning will, a lust of strength which was scornful at once of petty interests and petty delights. He was without question the biggest thing the Rougon family had produced.

When he thus found himself all on his own, free, after years of public engagement, he at first experienced a delightful sense of slumber. He got the impression that he had been kept awake till now ever since those overheated days of 1851. Therefore he accepted his fall from grace as if it were a holiday well earned by long public service. It was his idea to stay quite outside things for six months, long enough to select the most favourable jumping-off ground, and only then, when it suited his book, to plunge back into the great battle. But after only a few weeks he was already sick of resting. Never before had he been so clearly conscious of his own strength, and now that he was making no use of them, his head and his limbs seemed to be in the way. He spent days on end pacing about incessantly in the narrow space of his own garden, yawning frightfully, like one of those caged lions, for ever stretching stiffened limbs.

From then on his life was hateful to him, though he took care to conceal the boredom which weighed him down and was invariably good-natured, assuring people that he was really quite glad to be outside "all that muddle". It was only at rare moments that those heavy eyelids of his lifted for a moment and he eagerly followed public events, though, the instant he caught anybody noticing him, he would veil that glow in his eyes.

His fall had delighted many people. Not a day passed but some newspaper or other attacked him. They made him the personification of the *Coup d'État*, which brought in the Empire. He was responsible for the arrests and the exilings, in fact, all those acts of terror of which men spoke in guarded language. They even went the length of congratulating the Emperor on having cut himself free from a servitor who had been compromising him. At the Tuileries Palace the hostility was still greater. In his triumph, Count de Marsy produced one devastating witticism after another about Rougon and these shafts the ladies-in-waiting of Court passed on to "society". This hatred, however, was rather a solace to Rougon. It helped to bolster up his contempt for the human herd. So he was not forgotten; he was hated; to him that seemed a good thing. "*Rougon versus The Rest*" was a favourite dream of his. He pictured himself with a whip, keeping their snarling jaws at bay all round him. The insults intoxicated him. In the pride of his isolation he grew in stature.

Nevertheless, idleness was a frightful burden to his wrestler's sinews. Had he dared, he would have taken a spade and trenched a corner of his garden. Instead, he began a lengthy piece of writing. It was to be a comparative study of the English constitutional system, in comparison with that inaugurated by the French Empire of 1852. His aim was to examine the history and customs of the political life of the two peoples and show that liberty was at least as great in France as in England. But when he had assembled his material and had all he wanted, it required a tremendous effort to take up the pen. He would readily have put his thesis to the Chamber in a speech, but planning and writing a serious book, with due attention to fine shades of meaning, seemed to him a terribly difficult task and one of no immediate advantage. Matters of presentation had always worried him. Indeed, he really despised style, and he did not get beyond the tenth

page of this projected work. Although he kept the manuscript on his desk, he did not add twenty lines in a week. Whenever he was asked what he was busy with, his reply was to give a long, detailed exposition of his thesis, coupled with the hint that it would have important repercussions, but this was no more than an excuse behind which he concealed the hateful vacancy that every day now meant to him.

Thus months ran by, and his goodnatured smile grew still more placid. Not a hint of the heartache which he was stifling showed on his face. Whenever his friends lamented the situation, he had arguments ready to convince them that all was completely well with him. Was he not happy? Did he not love research? Was he not working at what interested him? This was far better than all at fevered restlessness of public business. If the Emperor did not need him, he was doing very well indeed to leave him at peace in his corner. Moreover, any such reference to the ruler was made invariably with great reverence. At the same time, Rougon did frequently remark that he was always ready, all he was waiting for was for his master to beckon to him, and he would at once reassume "the burden of power". But he always added that he was not going to do anything to provoke such beckoning. Indeed, he seemed zealously concerned with keeping outside things. In that silence of the early years of the Empire, amid that strange stupor which came from men's being at once aghast and fatigued, he would be able to catch the first hints of a new undercurrent of life. His supreme hope, indeed, was that there would be some sudden catastrophe that made him necessary. He was the man for grave situations, "the man with the heavy fist", as Count de Marsy had once remarked.

The Rougons were *at home* to friends on Thursdays and Sundays. People gathered in the big red drawing-room and there would be a *conversazione* till half-past ten. At that hour Rougon always relentlessly sent his friends home! Going to bed too late, he maintained, sooted up a man's brain. At ten o'clock sharp, with good housewifely concern for the least detail, Mme. Rougon served tea. There were always two plates of fancy cakes, though nobody ever touched them.

On the Thursday immediately after the July General Election of that year, the whole band were assembled in the Rougon *salon* by eight o'clock. The ladies—Mme. Bouchard, Mme. Charbonnel and Mme. Correux—had seated themselves

near an open window, to get the rare breath of air from the narrow garden. They formed one group, in the centre of which was M. d'Escorailles, regaling them with an account of the gay time he had had in his Plassans days, and how as a lad he had made a twelve-hour trip to Monaco, ostensibly to join a shooting party. Clad in a black gown, Mme. Rougon had half withdrawn behind a curtain. She paid no attention to the talk. From time to time she slipped softly away, for quarter of an hour at a time. The ladies also enjoyed the company of M. Charbonnel. Poised on the arm of a chair, he was staggered to hear a young man of the best breeding telling of such doings. Clorinda meanwhile was at the far side of the room, distractedly listening to a conversation about the harvest which had developed between her husband and M. Béjuin. Dressed in a tussore frock with a great deal of straw-coloured ribbon about it, she was staring hard at the opalescent globe of the one light in the room, and tapping her left palm lightly with a fan. At a card-table the Colonel and M. Bouchard were playing piquet in the yellowish light, while Rougon was solemnly, methodically and without end laying out *patience* on the square of green baize of a card-table. This game was his favourite amusement. It kept both his fingers and his mind preoccupied.

"Well, is it ever going to come out?" enquired Clorinda, going up to him, with a smile.

"Of course," was his calm reply, "it always comes out."

She stood watching from the other side of the table, while he laid out the whole pack in eight piles. When he had picked up all the cards again, two by two, she said:

"You were right, it has come out. . . . But what always was it you had in mind?"

He was in no hurry to reply. Slowly he raised his eyes, as if her question puzzled him.

"Tomorrow's weather," he said, at last.

He resumed laying out the cards. Meanwhile Delestang and M. Béjuin had finished their conversation. Peals of Mme. Bouchard's pretty laughter rang through the silent drawing-room. Clorinda went to one of the windows and remained there for a few moments, watching the dusk thickening. Then, still staring out, she put another question:

"Any news of poor M. Kahn?"

"I have had a letter from him," Rougon replied. "I expect him here this evening."

The talk now turned to M. Kahn's bad luck. During the last session of the Chamber, he had been ill-advised enough to make a rather sharp attack on an official proposal for legislation. It was a bill which in a neighbouring *département* would have established an alarming rival enterprise, which might well ruin his Bressuire ironworks. For that matter, M. Kahn did not think he had overstepped the limits of a legitimate defence of his own interests. But when he got back to his own *département*, the *Deux Sèvres*, where he was to start electioneering, it was to be informed point-blank by the Prefect that he had ceased to be the official candidate! He no longer inspired confidence. The Minister of the Interior had decided to replace his name on the list by that of a certain Niort lawyer who was a very mediocre sort of fellow. This had been a sledge-hammer blow to M. Kahn.

Rougon was giving the details, when in came the victim himself, followed by Du Poizat. They had both come up to Paris by the seven o'clock train. They had driven straight from the station. They had not even paused to dine.

"What do you make of it all? I ask you," cried M. Kahn, standing in the centre of the drawing-room with everybody pressing round him. "Now they've turned me into a revolutionary!"

Flinging himself down into an armchair, with worried countenance, Du Poizat expostulated:

"There's a way to fight an election! There's a mess for you! It's enough to disgust any decent man!"

Now they all insisted on M. Kahn's telling the whole story in detail. When he got down to Niort, he said, at once, at the very first calls he made, on his best friends too, he detected an atmosphere of embarrassment. As for the Prefect, M. de Langlade—well, in the first place, he was a man of no morals! Indeed, M. Kahn alleged that he was intimate with the wife of the particular Niort lawyer who was to be the new deputy. At the same time, M. Kahn said he felt in honour bound to state that de Langlade had intimated his fall from favour very nicely. In fact, he had done it at a luncheon at the Prefecture, over dessert and cigars. He retailed every word of the dialogue, from beginning to end. The worst thing was that his posters and election circulars were already being printed. His first

reaction had been one of such rage that he had wanted to insist on putting up.

"Yes, I can tell you," cried Du Poizat, turning to Rougon, "if you had not written us the letter you did, we should have taught the régime a nice lesson!"

Rougon shrugged his shoulders. Without pausing in his card-shuffling, he said:

"You would have failed, had you tried to, that's all there is about it, and then you would have been a permanently marked man. A fine step forward that would have been!"

"I simply don't know what stuff you are made of, Rougon!" cried Du Poizat, leaping to his feet and gesticulating wildly. "I tell you, for my part, this fellow Marsy's getting my goat. Besides, it's you he was getting at, when he hit out at M. Kahn. . . . Have you read milord's election address? Fine elections, his are. All words. . . . But it's no laughing matter. If you had been Minister of the Interior, you would have done it with a different sort of grandeur."

Then, seeing that Rougon was still grinning at him, he added, still more fiercely:

"We were down there, I tell you, we saw it all. . . . There's an unfortunate fellow, a man I was at school with, who made so bold as to put up as a Republican. You've just no idea how they have been harrying that man. The Prefect, the Mayors, even the gendarmerie, the whole band of them have been down on him. His posters have been torn off the hoardings, his leaflets have been tipped into the gutter, and the handful of poor wretches who undertook to take his literature round have been arrested. Even an aunt of his came out against him. Decent soul though she is, she actually asked him not to call on her any more because it is so compromising for her! As for the press, why, that has treated him just like a common criminal. You can see the womenfolk in the countryside making the sign of the cross to protect themselves, now, when he comes round."

Puffing and blowing fiercely, Du Poizat flopped into another chair.

"All the same," he went on, "even if Marsy has got his majority in the country districts, Paris, you know, has elected five opposition deputies! . . . People are beginning to wake up again. If the Emperor leaves the reins in the hands of that great fop and his bedroom prefects who get men made deputies so

they can sleep with the wives, then, let me tell you, before five years are up you'll see the Empire tottering on the brink of ruin. . . . If you ask me, the Paris election results are really stirring. They avenge us, you know."

"Well, and what if you had been Prefect?" Rougon asked, from the depths of his chair, still unruffled, and with a tinge of sarcasm so faint that it hardly twisted his thick lips at all.

Du Poizat bared his uneven white teeth. His fingers, those of a puny, sickly child, clutched the arms of the chair as if trying to tear them off.

"Ah," he muttered, "had I been Prefect. . . ." But he broke off, slumped back into his chair, and cried: "No, really, it is agonizing, you know. . . . As far as that question goes, I at least have always been a Republican."

The ladies at the window were silent, gazing into the *salon* and listening, while M. d'Escorailles, a large fan in between his fingers, was silently fanning pretty Mme. Bouchard. Temples faintly gleaming, she lay languishingly to get the benefit of the tepid air blowing in from the garden. From time to time the Colonel and M. Bouchard, who had begun another rubber of their piquet, halted their play, to nod or shake their heads in tune to the conversation. By now a large circle of chairs had formed round Rougon. All attention, head on hand, Clorinda was seizing on every little gesture, while Delestang, his mind on some sentimental thought, smiled at her. Hands clasped on knees, M. Béjuin was looking at each of the company in turn, with a rather scared expression on his face. The sudden eruption into the peace of this drawing-room of Du Poizat and M. Kahn had brought a breath of storm. With them they seemed to bear a breath of opposition in the very folds of their clothing.

"Well, I followed your advice, did I not. I withdrew my candidature," M. Kahn resumed. "I was warned that I should get even rougher treatment than the Republican. And to think with what devotion I have served the Empire! You must admit, such ingratitude is calculated to discourage the stoutest of souls."

He went on to complain bitterly of many deliberate frustrations. He had wanted to found a newspaper to back his proposals for a Niort-Angers branch railway. Later on, in his hands, this journal was to be a powerful financial weapon. But he had been refused permission. Count de Marsy had got

the notion that he was only a dummy for Rougon and the newspaper was to be a fighting journal, making an all-out attack on de Marsy's position.

"Heavens alive!" cried Du Poizat, "they are afraid somebody may some day put the truth on record. Oh, what fine articles I would have written, in your cause. . . . It is shameful having a press like ours, gagged and under constant threat of being shut down the moment it opens its mouth. A friend of mine who is publishing a novel has actually been summoned to the Ministry, where a departmental chief asked him to change the colour of his hero's waistcoat, because the Minister did not like that he had chosen. I am not inventing."

He quoted other facts and spoke of alarming stories which were going the rounds. A young actress had committed suicide, mixed up with a man who was said to be a relation of the Emperor's. One general had killed another in a corridor of the Tuileries Palace, when a certain theft came out. Now, could such stories ever find credence, if the press could speak out freely? To wind up, he repeated: "Yes, sir, I am definitely a Republican."

"You are very fortunate," murmured M. Kahn. "I just haven't a notion now what I am."

Bent over the cards, Rougon was now laying out a very difficult game. After distributing the cards first in seven, then five, then three piles, one had to end up with all the cards out and the eight clubs all together. He seemed to be so engrossed in this operation that he heard nothing, though at some things that were said, one might have thought that his ears seemed to twitch.

"The parliamentary system does offer genuine guarantees," said the Colonel. "If only we could get the monarchy back."

When in opposition, Colonel Jobelin was an Orleanist. He loved telling the story of the Mouzaia Pass engagement, in which he had carried a gun side by side with the Duke d'Aumale, then a captain in the fourth infantry regiment.

"We were very well off under Louis Philippe," he went on, when his nostalgic thoughts were received with dead silence. "Are you telling me, if we had a government responsible to Parliament, that our friend would not be at the helm of State before six months were out? The country would soon be able to boast another great orator."

But M. Bouchard was showing signs of impatience. He now

declared himself: he was a Bourbon supporter. In the old days his grandfather had nearly got to Court, so, at any of these parties, there were likely to be frightful clashes about politics between him and his cousin.

"You really haven't a leg to stand on," he murmured. "Your July Monarchy went from one makeshift to another. There is only one sound principle, you know that very well."

They began to get quite fierce with each other. Making short shrift with the Empire, each substituted the régime of his choice. A ding-dong struggle. Would the Orleans dynasty ever have haggled with an old soldier about the decoration due him? Would the legitimate dynasty of France ever have permitted the acts of favouritism which government office now exhibited? And when at last they reached the point of calling each other idiots, the Colonel snatched up his cards in a fury:

"Oh, Bouchard, for Heaven's sake!" he cried, "stow it.

Look at my hand! I have got fourteen tens and a sequence of four knaves. Is that not enough?"

The altercation had drawn Delestang out of his reverie, and he thought it his duty to come to the defence of the Empire. Not—good Lord!—that all the Empire did please him. He would have liked a more generous, open-hearted régime. He went on in an attempt to explain his dream government. It was in fact a most involved socialistic conception. Pauperism would be eliminated, because all workers would be linked together in one body. In a word it would be not unlike his model farm, *la Chamade*, on a larger scale.

Du Poizat usually maintained that Delestang had been too much in the company of his animals. While her husband thus held forth, nodding his magnificent, as it were, authoritative head, Clorinda watched him, a rather disdainful expression curling her lips.

"Yes, I am a Bonapartist," he declared, several times over. "A liberal Bonapartist, if you like."

"And you, Béjuin?" M. Kahn suddenly asked.

"Why, of course I am too," replied M. Béjuin, his speech quite woolly from his long silences. "I mean, there are of course certain points of detail. All the same, yes, I'm a Bonapartist."

Du Poizat shrieked with laughter.

"Good Lord!" he cried, and, when pressed to make himself

clear, without beating about the bush went on to say: "A nice pair, I find you, indeed! What have you got to complain of? You've neither of you been dropped. Delestang's still a councillor and Béjuin has just been re-elected deputy."

"But that was a matter of course," interrupted Béjuin. "You see, the Prefect of the Cher *département*. . . ."

"Oh, I know you had nothing to do with it, I am not making any charges. We all know how these things are done. . . . Combelot has been re-elected too, so has La Rouquette. . . . A magnificent man, our Emperor!"

Here M. d'Escorailles, who was still engaged in fanning Mme. Bouchard, thought it fit to join in. He, now, would also stand up for the Empire. But for different reasons. He was a supporter of the Emperor because he thought the Emperor had a mission to fulfil. Speaking for himself, he said, he put the well-being of France first.

"But you have managed to hold on to your position in the civil service, haven't you?" replied Du Poizat, raising his voice. "After all, your views are no secret. . . . Good gracious, what I've just been saying seems to have upset you all. But surely it's plain enough. . . . You see, neither Kahn nor I are any longer paid to turn the blind eye. . . . That's the long and the short of it!"

This sally caused a show of temper. Oh, no, no! This view of politics was hateful! There was more in politics than personal interest! Though the Colonel and M. Bouchard were no Bonapartists, they did recognize that there were Bonapartists with ideals. They enlarged again on their own convictions, with still greater fervour, as if somebody had been trying to filch these convictions from them. Delestang, indeed, was quite hurt. He insisted that he had been misunderstood, and indicated important points on which he parted company with any blind supporter of the Empire. This led him on into new elaboration of the democratic tendencies of which it seemed to him the Emperor's régime was capable. Nor would M. Béjuin, and still less M. d'Escorailles, agree to be just Bonapartists. They too hinted at great shades of distinction, each walling himself off in his own particular specialist outlook, which was not easy to define. The net result was that in ten minutes' time the whole gathering had crossed into opposition. Voices were raised, separate arguments broke out, and the words "legitimist", "Orleanist", and "Republican" were

banded about amid renewed statements of political outlook. While all this was going on, Mme. Rougon's worried face showed for an instant in one of the doorways, but silently she withdrew again.

Meanwhile, Rougon had finally managed to get his *clubs* all to come out. Amid this hubbub of political argument, Clorinda leant over his shoulder.

"It's come out?"

"But of course!" he replied, with his tranquil smile.

Only then did he appear even to notice the din. He waved at them.

"What a hullabaloo you're all making!" he cried.

They were all silent, thinking he wanted to say something. One could have heard a pin drop. Rather wearied of talk, they waited. But all Rougon did was fan out thirteen cards on the table and quietly assess them:

"Three queens. . . . That's a quarrel. . . . News tonight. . . . A dark lady to beware of. . . ."

Du Poizat grew impatient and interrupted:

"And you, Rougon," he demanded, "what's your view?"

The great man flung himself back in his armchair. Checking a yawn with one hand, he stretched his limbs. Then, jerking his chin up as if he had a stiff neck, he fixed his gaze on the ceiling and murmured:

"Oh, you know very well what I stand for. I'm an authoritarian. One's born like it. It's not a viewpoint. It's just a need. . . . And you are all very silly to argue about it. With us French, five men in a drawing-room at once means five different régimes. But that's never any hindrance to any one of them's serving whoever's recognized to be in power. Come now, am I not right? It's all just something to talk about! . . ."

He lowered his chin and glanced slowly round the room, at each in turn.

"Marsy's managed his elections very well indeed," he continued. "You shouldn't find fault with the instructions he has issued to his Prefects. Why, the last circular had real punch in it. . . . As for the press, why, that is already too free. Wherever should we be if every Tom, Dick and Harry could write what he thought? I too would have rejected Kahn's application for a newspaper permit. There is never any sense in providing your adversaries with weapons. . . . Don't forget that empires which become soft at heart are lost empires.

France calls for an iron hand. It's all for the good to have a tight grip on her throat."

Delestang would have protested. Rhetorically he began:

"Notwithstanding what you say, one does observe the existence of a need for a certain modicum of liberties. . . ."

But Clorinda quickly silenced him. With exaggerated nods, she gave everything Rougon had said the seal of her approval. Won over to his cause, his submissive servant, she bent forward so he should see her better, so that when he resumed it was with a swift glance at her.

"Ah, there we have it!" he cried. "Those essential liberties! I was just waiting for them to pop up. . . . Mark my words, were the Emperor to ask me my opinion, he would not grant a single one of them."

Delestang again began to get worked up, but once more, his wife kept him quiet by a terrible frown of her lovely eyebrows.

"Not one!" Rougon repeated, forcibly.

He had raised himself half out of his armchair and looked so menacing that nobody breathed a word. Then, limp and relaxed, he slumped back again, and murmured:

"There, see how you make me shout, even me. . . . And when I'm just a decent ordinary citizen, as I am now. I have no need to mix in it all! And how glad I am, too! And I hope to high Heaven the Emperor does not need me again."

At this instant, the drawing-room door opened. He put a finger to his lips and, very softly, called:

"Sh!"

It was M. La Rouquette who entered. Rougon suspected he had been sent along by his sister, Mme. de Llorentz, to ferret out what the talk was in his *salon*. Though it was scarcely six months since Count de Marsy had married, he had already taken up again with Mme. de Llorentz, who had been his mistress for nearly two years before. So, the moment the young deputy appeared, all political discussion ceased, and Rougon's *at home* resumed its air of harmlessness. Rougon insisted on going himself to find a large lampshade. When at last he had established this in position on the lamp, all that could be seen in the restricted circle of yellowish light which remained were the dry hands of the Colonel and M. Bouchard, laying down cards with regular alternation. By the window, Mme. Charbonnel in low tones told Mme. Correux all her troubles, with M. Charbonnel to underline every detail with a deep sigh. It

would soon be two years since they came to Paris, and their wretched case was still not settled. Only yesterday they had had no option but to buy themselves new underwear, a complete set each, for they had been informed that the decision had again been postponed. A little in the background was Mme. Bouchard, by one of the window-curtains. She seemed to be asleep, overcome by the heat, but M. d'Escorailles had now joined her. And then, since nobody was watching, they actually had the calm audacity to press half-opened lips together and exchange a protracted kiss. Motionless, utterly absorbed, Mme. Bouchard did not stir, except to open her eyes very wide.

"Oh, gracious me, no," M. La Rouquette was saying, "I certainly have not come from the *Variétés*. I saw the dress rehearsal. And very jolly music it is, too. It will be a great success, all Paris will be going to see the show. . . . No, I had a piece of work to finish off. A little thing I am getting ready. . . ."

He had shaken the hands of the gentlemen and planted a gallant kiss on Clorinda's wrist, just where the glove ended, and was now leaning against the back of a chair, a smile on his countenance, and faultlessly dressed. There was certainly a demonstrative gravity even in the way his frock-coat was buttoned.

"By the way, Rougon," he said, turning to his host, "I have a thing I must show you which will come in for your big work. It is an essay on the English constitution, a fascinating piece of work, upon my word, it appeared in a Viennese magazine. And how's the book getting on, may I ask?"

"Rather slowly," Rougon replied. "I am at a chapter which is giving me some trouble."

As a rule, he found it interesting to get the young deputy to talk. He could always gather from him all that was going on at the Tuileries. Convinced this evening that La Rouquette had been sent to find out what he thought of the outstanding victory of the Government candidates, Rougon without risking a single phrase worth repeating contrived to extract quite a lot of information from him. First, he congratulated him on his own re-election, then, with benevolent mien, he conducted the conversation by mere nods of his head. La Rouquette was delighted to be the speaker. And off he went; the Court was beside itself with delight, the Emperor himself had learned the results at Plombières, La Rouquette had been told that when

the news came in the Emperor's legs absolutely gave way, so great was his emotion. He was obliged to sit down. The only flaw was that, however great the triumph, it was overshadowed by alarm, because Paris has voted so ungratefully.

"Pooh! Easy to muzzle Paris!" murmured Rougon, stifling another yawn, as if rather because there was nothing really startling in all these details that M. La Rouquette was giving him.

Ten o'clock struck. Mme. Rougon pushed a tea-trolley into the centre of the room and served tea. Now, separate little parties formed in corners. Cup in hand, M. Kahn faced Delestang (who never took tea because it excited him), and once again entered into details about his trip through the Vendée. His great interest, the concession for a railway from Niort to Angers, was still at the same stage. That scoundrel de Langlade, Prefect of the Deux Sèvres *département*, had actually dared make use of the project for his electioneering purposes in support of the new official candidate. M. La Rouquette meanwhile slipped in behind the ladies and whispered things in their ears that made them smile. Behind a rampart of armchairs, Mme. Correur was in the midst of a lively exchange with Du Poizat. She was asking for news of her brother, M. Martineau, the Coulonges solicitor, and Du Poizat said he had seen him for a moment outside the church. He was always the same, unsmiling and chilly. Then, as Mme. Correur began her usual complaints, he very haughtily told her she would do well never to set foot down there again, Martineau's wife had sworn she would turn her out of the house. Gulping down her tea, Mme. Correur choked with indignation.

"Well, children," said Rougon, paternally, all at once, "time for bed, you know."

It was indeed twenty-five past ten. He gave them five minutes more. The guests began to take their departure. Rougon saw M. Kahn and M. Béjuin to the door. Mme. Rougon begged them both to convey her love to their wives, whom for that matter she never saw more often than twice a year. Then he gently edged the Charbonnels too towards the door. They were always too shy to say goodbye. At last, when pretty Mme. Bouchard left, with M. d'Escorailles on one side and M. La Rouquette on the other, he turned to the card-table.

"I say, Monsieur Bouchard," he cried, "do take care, they're abducting your good lady!"

But the *chef de bureau* seemed deaf as he declared his cards:

"A grand sequence of clubs, what do you say to that, eh? And three kings. . . . Not bad, that, either, eh?"

Rougon gathered up the cards in his big fists.

"All over," he said, "off you go! Aren't you ashamed of yourself, getting so fierce? I say, Colonel, steady, steady!"

It was the same every Thursday, every Sunday. He always had to break into the middle of a savage card contest, even sometimes put the light out, to make them abandon their game, and they would leave the house outraged by his violence, and wrangling all the time.

Delestang and Clorinda were the last. While her husband looked everywhere for her fan, Clorinda addressed Rougon tenderly.

"You are very mistaken not to take a little exercise, you will be getting ill," she said.

He made a gesture of mingled indifference and resignation. Mme. Rougon was already collecting the cups and the teaspoons. Then, while Delestang shook his hand, he yawned openly, without restraint, then, out of politeness, not to leave the impression that it was boredom with the *at home* that made him do it, he said:

"Oh, what a stuffy night, how I shall sleep!"

These *at homes* were all so much the same. As Du Poizat once neatly said, it always turned to "overcast with some drizzle" in the Rougons' *salon*. He found it all "a little too *pi* for me". Clorinda was invariably very daughterly to Rougon. She also made frequent afternoon visits to the house, always on some specific errand. To Mme. Rougon she would laughingly say that she had come to make love to her husband. With a smile on her bloodless lips, Mme. Rougon would then leave them alone for hours. They would chat cordially together without any apparent thought of what had once been, and shake each other's hands frankly in that same study where only a year ago he had pawed the ground round her with desire. In this way, with all that cast to limbo, they both of them revelled in an unruffled comradeship. He would tuck wisps of her hair into place—for she was just the same as ever, wind-blown—or he would help her to gather together an exaggerated train of skirts, when these got caught among the

chairs. One day, as they passed through the garden, she opened the stable door, with curiosity; then, with a little laugh, went inside. Hands in pockets, he too smiled.

"Huh! Weren't we a couple of ninnies, once?" he murmured.

What was more, as a rule he had some excellent piece of advice for her, when she came to see him. He pleaded the cause of Delestang, who after all was a good husband, and she was quite sensible, said she had a very high opinion of him. For that matter, she maintained that Delestang had no cause whatever to complain of her conduct, said she did not even flirt with anybody, which was absolutely true. Everything she said, indeed, evidenced a great indifference regarding men, even, one might almost say, scorn of them. When a certain person was mentioned of whom it was whispered that her lovers were innumerable, she gaped, wide-eyed, like a child, and said: "Does she really find it so entertaining?" For weeks on end she would forget her own appearance entirely, only recalling it when she specifically needed it, though then could make terrible use of it, like a weapon. So when, on occasion, with strange insistence, Rougon kept talking about the matter and advised her to be faithful to Delestang, in the end she got quite annoyed.

"For Heaven's sake don't keep fussing so!" she cried. "I know that very well. . . . Really, you are quite insulting."

One day, she replied quite bluntly:

"Look here, and if I did, what harm would it do you? You would lose nothing!"

He flushed scarlet, and for some time after that he did not utter a word about her duty or about public opinion, or the conventions. That persistent eruption of jealousy was the only trace left in him of his former passion. He finally even went so far as to have her watched in the *salons* she frequented. Had he detected the merest flirtation he would quite likely have warned her husband. Indeed, when alone with Delestang, he used to drop him hints in that direction, speaking of Mme, Delestang's exceptional beauty. But Delestang only laughed rather stupidly. He was utterly confident, so that in regard to the Delestang couple it was only Rougon who went through the agonies of the deceived husband.

His other advice (very practical, for that matter), revealed great friendship for Clorinda. It was, for instance, he who

gently brought her round to sending her mother to Italy to live. Alone now in that little house on the *Champs Elysées* Avenue, the Countess de Balbi was living a rather unconventional sort of life which excited a deal of talk. Rougon undertook to arrange the ticklish question of a permanent home in which the mother could live. The *Champs Elysées* house was sold, and thereby all the younger woman's past life was expunged. After that, Rougon began a campaign to cure her of her extravagances. Here however he came up against a simplicity of outlook which was absolute and also a woman's pigheaded refusal to change. Married and rich, Clorinda led an amazingly spendthrift existence, mingled with sudden bouts of a miserliness which was really outrageous. She had kept her little maid, that swart little Antonia who was always sucking oranges, day and night, and between them these two females made the rooms occupied by the mistress of that mansion in the *rue du Colisée* abominable with filth. When Rougon went to see Clorinda, he would find dirty plates in the armchairs, while rolled against the skirting would be sticky empty fruit-syrup bottles, and underneath the chairs he could just imagine the pile of unclean things which would have been thrust out of sight when they heard him arrive.

Thus, within walls the elegant paper on which was blotched with grease-spots, and with furniture grey with dust, Clorinda continued her eccentricities. Many a time she received Rougon but half dressed, merely wrapped in a counterpane, and stretched out on a divan, complaining of the most unheard-of troubles—dogs which had nibbled at her feet and pins which she had swallowed by accident and were on the point of coming out at her left hip. On other occasions she would draw the Venetian blinds at three o'clock, light all the candles, and, locked in each other's embrace, she and her maid would dance together, laughing so crazily that when he did come in it took the girl a good five minutes, leaning against the door, to get her breath before she could remove her presence. One day, Clorinda refused to be seen at all. She had tacked her bed-curtains together from top to bottom and there she sat, propped up against a bolster, in her curtain cage, chatting with him for a whole hour as if they were on either side of a hearth. It seemed to her quite normal to behave like that, and she was astonished when he scolded her. She argued that she was doing no harm and it was vain to him to lecture her about

conventions or to engage to make her the most seductive woman in all Paris. She grew indignant and repeated:

"I'm like this and this is how I live. . . . Whatever does it matter to other people?"

Sometimes, she smiled.

"All the same, get away with you, I'm loved, you know," she murmured.

It was quite true. Delestang did simply worship her. She was ever his mistress, the more powerful, the less she seemed to be his wife. He turned a blind eye to her whims, because he lived in terror of her leaving him, as she did one day threaten to do. Perhaps the real reason for his submission was a vague awareness that she really was superior to him, and strong enough to do what she wanted with him. In company, however, he treated her as a child, speaking of her with the indulgent tenderness that befitted a serious man. But when they were alone, this handsome, stalwart male with the splendid head would burst into tears any night that she refused to open her door to him. The only act of rebellion in him was that of keeping the first-floor rooms locked, and the keys out of her reach, to preserve his big drawing-room from grease-spots.

Nevertheless, Rougon did get Clorinda to dress nearly the same as other women, though with that craftiness of the lunatic able to reason who is always so sensible when strangers are present, she was very cunning about it. There were houses in which he met her behaving with the greatest reserve, letting her husband have the lead, perfectly conventional amid all the admiration that her great beauty excited, but at her house he often came upon M. de Plouguern and she would then tease first one, then the other, while they showered their maxims on her. Then, the more familiar of the two, the elderly senator, would pat her cheeks, much to Rougon's annoyance. But he never dared say exactly what he thought about that. He was more courageous, however, regarding Rusconi's secretary, Luigi Pozzo. He had caught him leaving her house more than once at the most unusual hours. When he intimated to the young woman how badly this conduct might compromise her, she shot at him one of those lovely glances of utter bewilderment, then burst out laughing. A lot she cared about Parisian public opinion, she said. In Italy, ladies received what men they liked, and nobody thought nasty things. In any case,

Luigi did not count, he was a cousin of hers, he came to bring her Milanese biscuits which he bought in the *Colbert* arcade.

Politics, however, remained Clorinda's great passion. Since her marriage to Delestang, all her intelligence had been spent on involved, occult manoeuvrings of which nobody knew the real significance. In this she was satisfying her thirst for intrigue, which for so long had been absorbed by her campaigns of seduction of men with a big future. Now it began to look as if all those efforts to net the right husband to which she had lent herself up to the age of twenty-two, were merely so much preparation for some vaster task. She kept up a very persistent correspondence with her mother, who was established at Turin. She herself went to the Italian Legation nearly every day. Count de Rusconi would take her into a corner and they would indulge in rapid *sotto voce* conversation. Then came enigmatic visits to people all over Paris, including both furtive calls on eminent personalities and *rendez-vous* arranged in the sort of places to which decent folk simply did not go. All the refugees from Venice, all the Brambillas and Staderinos and Viscardis, saw her in secret and handed in scraps of papers covered with notes. She had acquired a real morocco brief-case, a really monumental one, indeed, complete with steel lock, a brief-case worthy of a minister, and she carried a multiplicity of documents about with her in this. In a cab she would dandle it in her lap like a muff. Everywhere that she called, her brief-case went with her, tucked under her arm with a gesture which became quite familiar, or one might meet her in the morning and see her clutching it to her bosom in hands stiff with numbness. In time this brief-case grew shabbier. It burst at the seams. This she cured by tying it together with scraps of webbing. With her extravagant gowns and dragging skirts plus that obligatory shapeless leather bag crammed to bursting-point with papers, she was like a down-at-heel lawyer doing the rounds of the police courts to pick up a few francs.

Many a time Rougon had tried to find out about Clorinda's "important business". One day, left alone for a moment with that famous portfolio, he had no scruples about pulling out the letters which were already protruding through the gaping seams. But what he did learn, in one way or another, seemed so incoherent, and so little pieced together into a coherent whole, that the young woman's political pretensions merely

made him smile. One afternoon she calmly outlined to him a very ambitious project: she was working, she said, for an alliance between Italy and France, with a view to a coming campaign against Austria! Though struck by this for a moment, in the end Rougon merely shrugged his shoulders. There were other things of such silliness mixed into the plan. All he saw in it was evidence of a rather high-level originality. But it did not make him change his opinion of women one jot or tittle.

For that matter, Clorinda was quite ready to accept the position of disciple. Whenever she went to see him, she humbled herself tremendously, all submission, just asking questions and waiting on his words with all the fervour of a neophyte anxious to learn. He for his part often enough forgot to whom he was speaking, and outlined to her his views on government, to the point of making the most outspoken declarations of policy. Gradually, such talks became customary between them. He made her his earpiece and compensated for the silence which he maintained with his best friends by treating her as a discreet pupil whose respectful admiration delighted him.

During August and September, Clorinda made more frequent calls, till she was going to see him three or four times a week. Never had she shown such discipular devotion. She flattered him all this time a great deal, growing rapturous about his brilliance and lamenting the great things he would have achieved had he not been put on the scrap-heap. One day, in a lucid moment, he laughingly turned to her and said:

"You really feel a need for me, then?"

"I certainly do," she replied, boldly.

However, she lost no time about reassuming her air of rapturous wonder. Politics, she said, entertained her more than any novel reading could. When he turned away from her, she opened very wide eyes. In them a brief flame flickered up, the lingering suspicion of a bitterness which had never died. Often she left her hands in his, as if she still felt too weak. And in such moments, her hands would quiver, as if waiting till she had stolen sufficient strength from him, to throttle him.

What worried Clorinda more than anything else was Rougon's growing lassitude. She could see him being lulled to indifference about everything by his boredom. At first, she had detected a certain element of play-acting in his attitude. But now, despite all her subtlety of analysis, she was beginning

to think that he really had lost heart. His gestures had become more sluggish, his voice had lost its bite, and there were days when he revealed such benevolence that, horrified, the young woman wondered whether after all he was not meekly going to accept retirement to the Senate as the worn-out politician.

Towards the end of September, Rougon appeared very preoccupied, and eventually, during one of their customary chats, he admitted to her that he was nursing a great plan. He was getting bored in Paris. He needed air. Then it all came out. It was a grandiose scheme for a new life altogether, the life of a voluntary exile in the breck country of the Landes. He was going to break up an imposing number of square miles of that waste land and establish a township in the heart of the new terrain he would thus master. Her cheeks bloodless, Clorinda heard him to the end.

"But—your position here, your hopes!" she cried, at last.

With scornful gesture, he murmured:

"Pooh, all castles in Spain. . . . The truth is, I'm not really made for politics at all."

He had again taken up a pet dream of his, that of being a big landowner, with vast herds of animals over which he would reign. Down on those heathlands his ambition had grown, till he was now the victorious monarch of a new land. He had a whole people under him. Endless details followed. In secret he had been studying authorities on such matters for the past fortnight. He drained waterlogged land. With powerful machinery he broke up panned subsoil. With conifer plantations he halted wind erosion. He endowed France with a miraculously fertile tract of territory. All that active nature of his which had gone to sleep, all that unoccupied giant's energy of his were wakened in this creative dream. Clenching his fists, he seemed already to be cracking resistant rocks. Effortlessly his hands turned over the soil. He shouldered prefabricated houses into place, setting them down where he willed along the banks of canals which he cut with his own feet. Nothing easier than all this. There, he was going to find all he needed to do. No doubt he still enjoyed the Emperor's goodwill sufficiently to be given a *département* to develop. There he stood, cheeks glowing, a good span taller now his fibres had thus taken on new vigour. He laughed boisterously.

"Isn't it a grand idea, eh?" he cried. "I shall bequeath my name to a new town. I am going to found my own little empire!"

At first Clorinda thought he was just romancing. It was a wild dream born of the extreme and oppressive tedium of his present life. But during the following days he spoke to her again about this plan of his, and with even more enthusiasm than before, and now, every time she went to see him, she found him lost among maps spread all over desk and chairs and floor. One afternoon she was unable to see him at all: he had two engineers with him, discussing things. Then she really did begin to feel terribly afraid. Was he then in all earnest going to plant himself down there, in the heart of deserted country to build this town of his? Surely not—surely he must be planning some new political grouping? She refused to accept the truth, yet nevertheless thought it prudent to sound the tocsin to all the band.

There was general consternation. Du Poizat completely lost his temper. For more than a year, he cried, he had been cooling his heels. When he went down to the Vendée the last time, and he ventured to ask his father for ten thousand francs to start a magnificent business scheme, the old man had taken a pistol from a drawer. Now he was beginning to be on really short commons, just as he was in 1848. M. Kahn was equally infuriated. His Bressuire blast furnaces were on the point of bankruptcy. He felt he was lost if he could not get his railway concession in the next six months. The others—M. Béjuin, the Colonel, the Bouchards, the Charbonnells—were equally vociferous with complaints. It could not end like that. Really, Rougon was going too far. They would have to speak to him.

Nevertheless, a whole fortnight sped by. Clorinda, to whom they all paid great attention, had laid down that it would be bad policy to make a frontal attack on the great man. One Sunday evening, towards the middle of October, when the friends were all at Rougon's regular *at home*, with a smile, Rougon said: "I am sure you don't know what I received today?" and behind the mantelpiece clock took a pink card which he showed them. It was an imperial invitation, to a house party at Compiègne Castle, where the Court was in residence.

At this instant the footman discreetly opened the door. The man His Excellency was expecting was there. With an apology, Rougon withdrew. Clorinda, who had risen to her feet, all ears at Rougon's news, now, in the silence which followed, said firmly:

"He simply must go to this reception of the Emperor's."

Cautiously, the friends looked about them. But they were quite alone. Mme. Rougon had vanished a few minutes before this. *Sotto voce*, their eyes on all the doors, they now discussed the question freely. The ladies were standing round the hearth, in which a huge log fire was blazing. M. Bouchard and the Colonel were as usual at their *piquet*. The other gentlemen had pushed their armchairs to one corner, to be alone. Clorinda stood in the centre of the room, head sunk, deep in thought.

"Was he expecting somebody, then?" queried Du Poizat. "Whoever could it be?"

The others shrugged their shoulders. They had not the faintest idea.

"May be somebody else for that stupid plan of his," Du Poizat continued. "I've had enough of it all. One of these evenings, you will see, I shall tell him straight all I think."

"Hush!" said Kahn, laying a finger to his lips.

The former Sub-Prefect had raised his voice rather alarmingly. For a few seconds, they all listened. Then it was M. Kahn himself who spoke, though very softly:

"There's no gainsaying it: he has incurred obligations towards every one of us all."

"You might well put it that he has contracted a debt," added the Colonel, laying down his cards.

"Yes, indeed, that's the very word, a debt," declared M. Bouchard. "On the last day, in the *Conseil d'État*, we did not let him down, did we?"

The others supported him energetically with nods. A general lamentation began. Rougon had ruined them all. M. Bouchard added that if he himself had not been so loyal to misfortune, he would have been *chef de bureau* long ago, while, to listen to the Colonel, without any special effort on his part he had been offered the Commander's *cross* and a post for his boy Auguste, but out of friendship for Rougon had refused. Pretty Mme. Bouchard said that M. d'Escorailles father and mother were very hurt indeed to see their son stuck as a probationer. For the last six months at least, they had been expecting to see him established with the rank of secretary. Even those who said nothing—Delestang, M. Béjuin, Mme. Correux, and the Charbonnells—pursed their lips and raised their eyes heavenwards with the air of martyrs whose patience was beginning to peter out.

"In a word, we've been robbed," went on Du Poizat. "But he won't go down south, I'll answer for that. Now, is there any sense in going to wage a war against stone and sand in a god-forsaken corner of the country, when one has serious interests in Paris? Perhaps you would like me to have a word with him?"

Clorinda emerged from her reverie, to impose silence with a single gesture. Then, after opening a door to make sure nobody was there, she repeated what she had said before:

"Understand, he simply must go to this imperial house party."

But when they all turned to her, she silenced them with another gesture.

"No, not a word here!"

Nevertheless, she did go on to remark that she and her husband too had invitations to Compiègne. She even let slip the names of the Count de Marsy and Mme. de Llorentz. But she ventured no further explanation. They would push the great man into power, despite himself; they would compromise him, if necessary. M. Beulin-d'Orchère and the whole of the high court bench were stoutly for him. M. La Rouquette further asserted that though all his own friends loathed Rougon, he never breathed a word against him. On the contrary, whenever Rougon's name was mentioned, he remained grave, never a hint of what he felt in his eyes or on his lips, hidden by his moustaches.

"It is not a question of ourselves at all," declared M. Kahn, in the end, "but of the country. If we succeed, France will owe us much gratitude."

He continued to sing loud praise of the master of the house.

Meanwhile, the sound of voices had risen in the adjoining room. Bitten by curiosity, Du Poizat opened the door sharply as if going out, then closed it at once again, but slowly enough to catch a glimpse of the man who was calling on Rougon. It was Gilquin, in a huge, almost clean overcoat, in his hand a stout stick with brass handle. Without attempting to speak quietly, he was saying, with exaggerated familiarity:

"I say, old man, don't send to the *rue Virginie* in *Grenelle* any more; I've had trouble there, I'm staying at the *Batignolles* now—*Guttin passage*. . . . Well, you can count on me, you know. So long!"

He shook Rougon's hand. When Rougon re-entered the

drawing-room he begged their pardon. But he shot Du Poizat a keen glance.

"He's a fine fellow, Gilquin, isn't he, Du Poizat, eh? You know him, of course, don't you? . . . He's recruiting settlers for my new world, down in the Landes, you know. . . . Of course, you'll all join me down there, won't you? You can make your fortunes. Kahn will be my Prime Minister. Delestang and his wife can have the Foreign Affairs portfolio jointly. Béjuin can look after the post office. And I'm not forgetting the ladies, either; Mme. Bouchard will wield the sceptre of beauty and I shall hand Mme. Charbonnel the key of our warehouses."

He was joking, of course, but, all on tenterhooks, the friends inwardly wondered whether he had not overheard them through some crack in the wall. When he said he would give the Colonel all the legions of honour he wanted, that worthy gentleman nearly lost his temper. All this time, however, Clorinda was still examining that invitation to Compiègne, which she had taken down from the mantelpicce.

"Are you going down to the house party?" she suddenly asked, airily.

"Why, of course I am," replied Rougon, in surprise. "I have every intention of making good use of the occasion to get the Emperor to give me my *département*."

It was now ten o'clock. Mme. Rougon reappeared; tea was served.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was approaching seven o'clock on the evening of Clorinda's arrival at Compiègne, and she was chatting with M. de Plouguern, near a window in the Map Gallery. Everybody was waiting for the Emperor and Empress to enter the dining-room. The second batch of the season's guests had been in readiness at the Castle since quite three o'clock. As everybody had not come down yet, the young woman was engaged in commenting on each new appearance. As they appeared in the doorway, the ladies with their décolleté gowns and flowers in their hair smirked meekly; their menfolk in white tie and knee-breeches, calves tight in silk stockings, remained preternaturally solemn.

"Oh, here's our de Rusconi!" she murmured suddenly. "Isn't he fine! . . . But look, godfather, look, that's M. Beulind'Orchère! Really, any moment you'd think that man would open his mouth and start barking, wouldn't you, now? And what shanks! Heavens!"

These spiteful sallies were M. de Plouguern's delight, and he sniggered at every one. De Rusconi came to make his bow to Clorinda, with all the languorous panache of your handsome Italian. He then made his round of the ladies, his head and shoulders rising and falling as one bow followed another. He was most captivating. Very grave, Delestang stood back a few paces from the wall and stared hard at the huge maps of the Compiègne Forest, with which the walls of the gallery were lined.

"Whichever coach did you get into?" Clorinda demanded of him. "I looked everywhere for you. I thought I was going to travel down with you. I found myself obliged to crowd into a carriage full of men. . . ."

She broke off and clapped her fingers to her mouth, to stifle a laugh.

"M. La Rouquette," she said, "but isn't he got up!"

"Food for schoolgirls," said the Senator, maliciously.

At this moment there came a great rustle of silks at the door, then a hand thrust it wide open and in swept a woman in a

gown so smothered in knots, flowers and laces that she had to squeeze her petticoats in with both hands to get through. It was Clorinda's sister-in-law, Madame de Combelot. Clorinda's eye swept her up and down.

"What won't people do!" she whispered, and, when M. de Plouguern turned to peer at her own *toilette*, she was dressed in the simplest muslin over a badly-cut *faille* foundation—she ran on with absolute unconcern: "Oh, don't look at me, god-father, I don't care anyway what I wear, people must take me as I am."

Delestang had now decided he had had enough of the maps. He approached his sister, and had a word with her, then brought her across to his wife. The two women could scarcely be polite to one another. They exchanged tart greetings. Then Mme. de Combelot swept on her way, trailing behind her a train of petticoats rather like a bed of flowering annuals. She made her way straight through the throng of silent men, who all drew back politely two or three steps as that spate of lace flounces bore down on them.

Left in the wake of it all with M. de Plouguern, Clorinda laughed again and made a spiteful reference to the passion which the lady in question had conceived for the Emperor. And when Senator Plouguern remarked how estimable it was of the Emperor not to take advantage of it, Clorinda cried:

"You surely don't really mean to praise him for such restraint? She's nothing but skin and bone. I certainly have heard men call her beautiful. But I never can see why. And that vapid face, too!"

But, all the time she chatted, Clorinda kept an anxious eye on the doorway.

"Ah! Now at last it must be M. Rougon!" she suddenly cried, only, with flashing eyes, a second later, to correct herself:

"Why, no, it's Count de Marsy!"

Faultlessly dressed in black coat and knee-breeches, the Minister approached Mme. de Combelot with a smile. While he offered her his greetings he swept the crowd of guests with a vague, but half-concealed glance. He might have recognized nobody. Then, as one and another bowed to him, he condescended to lower his head in response. Some of the men came up to him, and he was soon the centre of a select company, his pale countenance, with its subtle, malicious expression, towering over the shoulders of the jostling crowd.

"By the by," Clorinda ran on, edging M. de Plouguern deeper into the embrasure, "I've been counting on you for some details. . . . What do you know about those famous letters of Mme. de Llorentz?"

"Why, just what everybody knows," he replied.

He went on to speak of the three letters said to have been written by Count de Marsy to Mme. de Llorentz, nearly five years ago now, shortly before the Emperor's marriage. At the time Mme. de Llorentz had just lost her husband (a general of Spanish extraction), and she was in Madrid, settling some question of a legacy. It was the hey-day of the liaison, and, to entertain her, the Count was said to have indulged in his penchant for the spicy and in his letters sent her extremely high powered details about certain august personalities with whom he was in close contact. And the story went that ever since then Mme. de Llorentz, who was not only very beautiful, but also of a very jealous disposition, had clung to those scraps of paper, dangling them over the Count's head, an ever-ready menace.

"When he decided that he had to marry his Wallachian princess," the Senator wound up, "she, Mme. de Llorentz, did allow herself to be talked into acquiescence, but when she had put up with de Marsy's taking the princess on a month's honeymoon, she intimated to him that if he did not soon come back to heel, one fine morning she would plant those terrible letters on the Emperor's desk. So he resumed his fetters. . . . He simply heaps presents on her in his efforts to get her to give him back those accursed letters."

Clorinda laughed heartily. She found this a very amusing story. And she put question after question. Did this then mean that if the Count were false to Mme. de Llorentz, she was really likely to carry out her threat? Where did she keep the letters? What she herself had heard was that she kept them tucked in her own bosom, stitched into a satin satchel. Nobody had actually read them. M. de Plouguern alleged that one young man had made himself Mme. de Llorentz's humble slave for six long months, in a vain attempt merely to be able to get a copy of them.

"Damnation," he wound up, suddenly, "he never takes his eyes off you, little one! But of course, I was forgetting, you really have won his heart, haven't you. . . . Is it true that at his latest reception, at the Ministry, he was closeted talking to you for a whole hour?"

The young woman made no reply. She was no longer paying any attention. Motionless and superb, she was now waiting, while Count de Marsy stared across the room at her. Then, she slowly raised her head, till she in turn caught his eyes, then she awaited his bow. He came straight across to her and bent low. A very gracious smile never left her lips. All this passed without a word passing between them. The Count then went back to the little group he had left. M. La Rouquette was just holding forth, in a loud voice. He named de Marsy in every phrase, with "His Excellency this" and "His Excellency that".

Meanwhile the Map Gallery had gradually filled, till there were nearly a hundred persons present—senior officials, generals, foreign diplomatists, five deputies, three prefects, two painters, a novelist, two academicians, not to mention the Palace personnel, chamberlains, aides-de-camp and grooms. A confused murmur of voices was billowing up into the glittering candelabras. With short steps, those used to being invited to the Castle forged their way to and fro through the throng, while those invited for the first time stood rigid, not daring to force a path among the ladies. This initial period of constraint of a crowd of people, many of whom did not even know one another, but were thus suddenly brought together on the threshold of the Imperial dining-room, lent all their faces an expression of somewhat morose dignity. Every now and then there would be a sudden hush, all heads turning, vaguely tense. The Empire furnishing of the huge room, all those straight-legged pier-tables and square armchairs, all seemed to add to the gravity of this expectation.

"Here he is, at last!" whispered Clorinda.

Rougon had just come in. A couple of paces inside the room he halted for a moment. He had assumed that stocky, good-natured manner of his, shoulders slightly hunched, expression drowsy. At a mere glance he had detected the shudder of hostility that his very presence had caused in some small clutches of guests. Then, unruffled, lavishing handshakes left and right as he went, he so directed his steps as to bring himself face to face with de Marsy. The two men both bowed. They seemed delighted to see each other. Then, each holding the other's gaze with his own, as enemies giving recognition to each other's strength, they chatted in friendly fashion. A vacuum at once formed round them. The ladies keenly noted

their slightest gesture, while with affectation of great tact the men looked sternly in the opposite direction, only from time to time furtively glancing round at them, and there were whispers in corners. Whatever was the Emperor's dark intention? Why was he thus bringing these two personalities into conjunction. M. La Rouquette was most perturbed. He thought he could suspect something grave. He came across to M. de Plouguern to ask his opinion, and it tickled that gentleman's fancy to reply:

"Bless my soul, perhaps Rougon'll tip Marsy out. Better keep the right side of him. Unless, of course, the Emperor has some dirty scheme. He does sometimes. . . . Though it's just as likely that all he wanted was to watch them together—thought it might be funny."

The whispering had now ceased. A general movement began. Two Palace officials moved round from group to group, in whispers repeating a short phrase. Suddenly grave again, the guests began to move towards the left-hand door, there to form two files, gentlemen on one side, ladies on the other. Keeping Rougon at his side, Count de Marsy took up a position near the door. Behind them strung all the others, according to rank or position, and like this, in a state of great tension, they all waited three more minutes.

Suddenly both wings of the door swung open. His breast barred by the red of the grand ribbon, the Emperor entered, at his heels the Chamberlain Adjutant, M. de Combelot. The Emperor smiled faintly and halted opposite Count de Marsy and Rougon. His whole body swaying slightly, his fingers slowly twisted his long moustaches. And then, in a rather confused way, he murmured:

"Please tell Mme. Rougon how sorry we were to hear she was indisposed. . . . We should so have liked to have seen her here with you. . . . But let us hope it is only a trifle. There are so many colds about just now, aren't there?"

And he continued on his way. Two paces farther he shook hands with a general whom he asked for news of his son, referring to the boy as "my little friend Gaston". Gaston was of the same age as the Imperial prince, but was much sturdier. As the Emperor proceeded, the gentlemen bowed one by one, till, at the far end, M. de Combelot presented one of the two academicians who had come to court for the first time, and the Emperor talked about a recent book of which this author had

recently published. He had read some passages with the greatest pleasure, he said.

Meanwhile the Empress too had appeared, attended by Mme. de Llorentz. She was dressed in a very modest outfit, a blue silk gown under a tunic of white lace. With short steps she moved forward, smiling, graciously bending her head. From a plain blue velvet ribbon a heart made of diamonds dangled against her uncovered throat. She made a slow progress down the file of ladies. The continuous curtseys involved much rustling of billowing skirts, from which rose musky odours. Mme. de Llorentz presented a young lady, who seemed very moved by it. Mme. de Combelot assumed a sentimental familiarity.

When at last the sovereigns had both reached the end of the double file, they made their way back again, the Emperor now turning to the ladies and the Empress to the gentlemen, and there were further presentations. Scarcely anybody yet dared to indulge in free conversation. A respectful constraint sealed their lips as they faced each other, but when the Palace Adjutant-General appeared to announce that dinner was served, the ranks at last broke up, first there was a whispered exchange of conversation, then laughter rang clear in the huge gallery.

"Well, now you don't need me any more now, do you?" whispered M. de Plouguern, into Clorinda's ear.

She gave him a smile. She had halted facing Count de Marsy, to force him to offer her his arm, which indeed he did, with an air of great gallantry. For a moment, there was apparent disorder, then the Emperor and Empress led the way into the dining-room, followed by those appointed to sit on their right and left hands. On this occasion these were two foreign diplomats, a young American woman and the wife of a minister. The other guests followed behind as they chose, each arming in the lady of his choice. Gradually the procession took shape.

This entry into the dining-room was in fact very grand. Above the long table, glittering with a silver *épergne*, with hunting scenes—the stag at the start, the horns sounding the haloo, the dogs at the kill—there was a blaze of light from five chandeliers. The silver plate bordered the cloth with a succession of silver moons, while the flickering flames of the hot-plates, with their reflections in the polished metal, and all the cut-glass, streaming with liquid light, and the baskets of fruit

and the vases of flowers with their bright red, all lent the imperial table a splendour the vibrant light of which penetrated to every corner of the vast room. In through the double doors, wide open, poured the procession of diners, after its slow passage through the guards room, with the men bending their heads to speak, then rearing them high again in a secret titillation of pride at the triumphal progress they were involved in. With their bare shoulders flooded with streams of light, the ladies were all rapturous sweetness. Their long trains kept the couples well distanced on the rich carpeting. This, against the murmur of all their silks and satins, furnished the procession with additional majesty, making of it almost a lovers' approach, as the greedy throng made its way at last into surroundings of luxury, all light and warmth, like a sensuous bathing-pool in which the musky scent of the ladies' gowns mingled with a faint aroma of game picked out with shreds of lemon. And when, as they entered, and the men's eyes lit on all that magnificent spread, they were met by a military band hidden deep in an adjoining gallery, and like the fanfare opening a fairyland ball, this welcomed them with trumpets. Though their knee-breeches embarrassed them slightly, they involuntarily squeezed their ladies' arms and smirked with satisfaction.

The Empress now made her way back towards them, on the right hand, and took up a position in the centre of the table, while the Emperor made his way to the left, to assume a position opposite her. Once the special guests had been placed to left and right of Their Majesties, the other couples milled around for a moment, seeking next to whom they would sit, choosing where they pleased. There were eighty-seven at table this evening, and it took nearly three minutes for them all to be in place. As if by swift laughter, the splendiferous illumination of the chandeliers was now matched by the satiny skin of bare backs, the gawdy flowers of gowns, the diamonds in the towering coiffures. At last, the footmen took the hats which so far the gentlemen had been holding, and the whole company sat down.

M. de Plouguern had followed Rougon in, and sat next to him. After the soup, giving him a little nudge, he put a question to him:

"Did you engage Clorinda to patch things up with Marsy for you?"

As he spoke, his eye swiftly indicated the young woman. She was seated next the Count, on the far side of the table, and now deep in quite affectionate talk with him. Rougon seemed very annoyed, but all he did was shrug his shoulders. Then he pretended to see nothing but what was immediately in front of him, but despite all his efforts to remain indifferent, he still could not help occasionally bringing his glance round to Clorinda, following her slightest gesture and the movements of her lips, as if very anxious to make out what she was saying.

"Monsieur Rougon," said Mme. de Combelot, leaning across—she had placed herself as near the Emperor as possible—"do you remember our little accident? When you found me a cab? I lost a whole founce of my frock!"

She deliberately drew attention to herself, as she now told the story. One day her carriage had been nearly cut in two by a Russian prince's landau. Rougon could not do aught but reply. For a moment the centre of the table discussed this little event, then proceeded to rake up all manner of other accidents, including a girl who sold scent in the *Panoramas* arcade who only the other day had fallen from her horse and broken her arm, at which the Empress uttered a faint cry of sympathy. Though the Emperor himself said nothing, he gave ear to it all with great gravity, munching slowly all the time.

"Wherever has Delestang tucked himself away?" Rougon now asked M. de Plouguern.

They looked about for him. At last, the Senator picked him out. He was at the very end of the table, next to M. de Combelot, in the middle of the cluster of men, listening to some very free talk which was all cloaked by the general hubbub. M. La Rouquette had as a matter of fact just begun a tale about an amorous laundry girl in his home country, while Count de Rusconi was appraising the qualities of Frenchwomen and, in an undertone, one of the painters and the novelist were busy comparing very frank notes about the ladies, round the table. It was their arms. Either too podgy or too skinny, they gave rise to much sniggering. Meanwhile, as Clorinda became even more amiable to de Marsy, Rougon's sidelong glances swept from her to her fool of a husband. There the man was, with that solemn grin of his as the rather spicy things he heard. He was blind as a bat!

"Why on earth did he not sit here, with us?" Rougon murmured.

"Hm! I see no reason to be sorry for him," said M. de Plouguern. "They seem to be amusing themselves all right down there." Then he ran on, whispering into Rougon's ear:

"I bet they're fixing Mme. de Llorentz. Did you notice how low cut her bodice is? One's sure to slip out any moment, don't you think? By Jove, yes, the left-hand one!"

But even while he was leaning forward to get a better view of Mme. de Llorentz, seated on the same side as he was, five seats down, he suddenly became grave, for that lady, a fine blonde a trifle on the fleshy side, at that very moment had a frightfully savage expression on her face. Yes, she was in a cold rage, pale as a sheet, her blue eyes thunderously black, glaring at Count de Marsy and Clorinda with positive fury. Through clenched teeth, so faintly that even Rougon could not catch what he said, he murmured: "Hell, there's trouble brewing there."

The band was still playing distant music, which might have come from the ceiling. At some clashes of the cymbals, many eyes instinctively looked up to see what thing this was attacking them from above. And then it was gone, and deep in the neighbouring gallery, the lilt of the clarinets, mingled with the silvery chink of the plate, now being brought in huge piles. The big dishes rang as sonorously as cymbals. Around the table there was a silent bustle, as, without a word, a horde of servants got busy, ushers in tail coats and bright blue breeches, with swords and three-cornered hats, footmen with powdered hair and full livery green coats with gold froggings. The dishes came in, the wines went round and round, while those in charge of the kitchen, the principal carver and the silver master, stood looking on, supervising the complex operation, in the pell-mell of which the part which the merest valet had to play was laid down in advance. Behind the Emperor and Empress their personal servants were busy serving them, with punctilious dignity.

When the roasts appeared and the burgundies were poured out, the din of conversation rose louder. Now, in the men's corner at the bottom of the table, M. La Rouquette was talking food, discussing the nice degree of roasting of a haunch of venison, which had just been served. There had also been a *potage à la Crécy*, then boiled salmon and roast beef *entrecôte* with shallot sauce, capons *à la financière*, braised partridges on a nest of cabbage, and little oyster pasties.

"I bet we're going to get shrimps in sauce and cucumbers in sour cream!" said the young deputy.

"I saw some prawns," replied Delestang politely.

But when shrimps in sauce and cucumber in sour cream really did appear, M. La Rouquette was noisily triumphant. He knew the Empress's taste, he said. But in the very same instant, the novelist shot the painter a glance and with a faint click of his tongue observed that the cooking was distinctly mediocre, to which the painter replied with an approving pout. Then, taking a quaff of wine, he added that at least the drinks were very fine.

At this moment there was so loud a burst of laughter from the Empress that everybody at once was silent. Heads craned to find out what it was about. The Empress at the moment was in conversation with the German ambassador, who was on her right hand. And she was still laughing heartily. But whatever she said was inaudible, broken as it was by her bout of irrepressible laughter. Everybody was so curious to know what it was all about that the silence continued. It was suddenly harshly broken by the horns blaring out a smooth phrase from a popular song of the moment, against an accompaniment of muted double-basses, and at this interruption the general hubbub was gradually restored. Chairs were now half-turned round, elbows appeared as excited guests leant on the table, and in the great freedom of this princely hospitality, the company divided up into many separate conversation groups.

"Can I offer you a sweet biscuit?" suggested M. de Plouguern.

Rougon shook his head. He had finished eating, a few moments since. The heavy plate had now given place to Sèvres china, with its delicate blue and pink designs. The cheese and dessert in all their variety now passed down the table. Rougon took a minute portion of Camembert. Making no effort now to restrain himself, he was staring point blank at Clorinda and Count de Marsy. No doubt he was hoping to frighten the young woman. She was now assuming such intimacy with the Count that she seemed altogether to have forgotten where she was. She might have been snug in some cosy little boudoir, enjoying a dainty supper *à deux*. Her great beauty sparkled with an exceptional show of affection as she crunched the sweetmeats that the Count passed to her. She

was steadily conquering him with those uninterrupted smiles, and all with a *sangfroid* which was quite outrageous. People nearby were even beginning to whisper.

As the conversation had now drifted to the fashions, M. de Plouguern now leant forward and mischievously challenged Clorinda to pronounce on the latest in hats, but she pretended not to have heard. He leant further over, intending to put the same question to Mme. de Llorentz, then thought better of it, so menacing did that lady look, her teeth clenched, her features rigid with jealous fury—quite tragic, indeed. At that moment Clorinda had actually surrendered her left hand to the Count, with the excuse of letting him see an ancient cameo ring she was wearing. But she let him have her hand completely, let him slip the ring off her finger and then, still holding her hand, himself put it back again. Why, it was almost indecent. Mme. de Llorentz toyed so agitatedly with her spoon, that she broke her burgundy glass! A servant removed the debris.

"You mark my word," whispered the Senator in Rougon's ear, "they'll be pulling each other's hair out in a minute. Have you noticed what's been going on? I'll be damned, though, if I quite get what Clorinda is after. What's your guess, Rougon?"

But when a moment later he looked up at his neighbour, he was quite shocked by the look on his face.

"I say!" he cried. "Anything wrong, Rougon? Are you feeling ill?"

"No," Rougon replied. "It's only rather stuffy in here. These dinners last too long, you know. And the musk is quite overpowering."

But they were near the end. Some of the ladies were still nibbling at biscuits, as they lolled in their chairs. But, though nobody had risen, yet it was all over. Silent till now, the Emperor at last began to raise his voice. Guests at either end of the long table, who had quite forgotten their ruler's presence, suddenly began to pay attention, all with an air of great benevolence.

The Emperor was in fact making his reply to a declaration M. Beulin-d'Orchère had just delivered against divorce. Then, breaking off, he suddenly set his eyes on the very open bodice of the young American lady on his left and in his gluey voice, said:

"The only women I see get divorced in America are the ugly ones."

A laughter ripple ran through the company. This remark was regarded as a very subtle piece of humour, one, indeed, of such delicacy that M. La Rouquette was clever enough to lay bare all its hidden meanings. Doubtless, the young American woman herself took it as a compliment. Anyway, somewhat embarrassed, she thanked the Emperor by a gracious inclination of her head.

The Emperor and the Empress had now risen. There was a great rustle of petticoats and treading about round the table. The ushers and the footmen, solemnly ranged against the wall, were indeed the only really sober people amid this great rout of well-dined persons. The procession re-formed. With their Majesties at the head, the guests trailed out, spaced by the ladies' long trains. With a pomp which was rather breath-taking, they traversed the *salle des gardes*. Behind them, in the full glow of the chandeliers, resounded the beat of the big drum of the military band as this concluded the final figure of a quadrille.

On this particular evening, coffee was served in the Map Gallery. A Palace Prefect himself brought the Emperor's cup on a silver-gilt platter. Meanwhile, several of the guests had already gone up to the smoking-room. The Empress and some of the ladies had just withdrawn to her private drawing-room, which was on the left of the gallery. There were whispers that she had shown intense dissatisfaction at the strange behaviour of Clorinda during dinner. It had been her aim when in residence at Compiègne Castle to introduce good middle-class virtues into the Court, including a liking for innocent open-air sports and country pleasures. There were certain extravagant ways which she detested personally, rancorously, indeed.

M. de Plouguern had taken Clorinda aside to give her a little curtain lecture, though his real object was to get out of her what it was all about. But she pretended utter amazement. Whatever made anybody imagine she had compromised herself with Count de Marsy? They had exchanged a few pleasantries, that was all.

"I say, just look!" murmured the Old Senator.

The door which led to a small adjoining sitting-room was ajar, and he pushed it sufficiently open to show her inside:

it was Mme. de Llorentz, making a frightful scene with Count de Marsy. They had been seen to go in. Mad with fury, the fair-haired beauty was relieving her mind with very strong language indeed. She was losing all sense of measure, also forgetting that by shouting as she was she was risking a frightful scandal. Rather pale, but smiling, the Count was talking very quickly, but softly, in an undertone, trying to assuage her. Sounds of her scolding voice had penetrated to the Map Gallery. Those who heard it drew away from the little room, from prudence.

"So what you want is to have her broadcast those famous letters from top to bottom of this Castle, is it?" M. de Plouguern demanded. Offering Clorinda his arm, he was already moving away.

"Oh, but wouldn't it be funny!" she said, with a laugh.

Squeezing her bare arm with all the ardour of a young lover, he began sermonizing again. She should leave eccentricities to Mme. de Combelot. Further, she must know that Her Majesty had seemed most annoyed with her. Clorinda, with her hero-worshipping of the Empress, seemed very surprised at this. In what exactly could she have caused displeasure? As they came to the door of the family drawing-room, they paused for a moment to peer in through the still open door. Round a huge table was a great gathering of ladies. Seated amid them, the Empress was patiently teaching them the game of small-talk, while some of the gentlemen, behind their chairs, followed the lesson most gravely.

Meanwhile, at the far end of the Gallery, Rougon was dressing down Delestang. Not daring to talk to him about his wife, he was nagging him about the resignation with which he had accepted a room opening on to the Castle courtyard. He would have had him demand one facing the park, but, on M. de Plouguern's arm, Clorinda drew near. Loudly enough to be heard, she said:

"Oh do stop talking to me about your Count. I won't speak to him again all the evening. There, satisfied now?"

This declaration pacified them all. At that very moment, the Count himself emerged from the little room. He seemed most cheerful. He stood a moment, exchanging pleasantries with Rusconi, then he entered the domestic drawing-room, where the Empress and the ladies together could soon be heard laughing at some story he was telling them. Two minutes

later, Mme. de Llorentz also appeared. She seemed fatigued. Her hands were still unsteady, but when she saw that her every movement was being watched, she made a point of staying in the Gallery, chatting first with one group, then another.

The desire to be bored politely compelled the company to stifle their yawns in their handkerchiefs. The after-dinner hour at the Imperial Court was the most painful part of the day. Those who were first going through it and did not know what to do, went to the windows, to stare out into the night. In one corner, M. Beulin-d'Orchère went on with his dissertation against divorce. Finding the whole scene "killing", the novelist asked one of the academicians in a whisper if it would be out of order for him to go to bed. And all the time, dragging his feet across the length of the Gallery, the Emperor kept putting in an appearance, with a cigarette always stuck between his lips.

"It was impossible to arrange anything for this evening," M. de Combelot explained to the little group formed by Rougon and his friends. "Tomorrow, after the hunt, cold venison will be fed to the hounds by torchlight. The days after tomorrow, the Comédie Française is to come down and play Racine's *Plaideurs*. There is also talk of *tableaux vivants* and towards the end of the week there is to be a pageant."

He furnished details. His wife was to take part. Rehearsals were about to commence. Then at some length he told them all about the outing of the day before yesterday which the Court had made to the Turning Stone, a Druidic monolith round which archaeological excavations were in progress. The Empress had insisted on going down into the trenches.

"Just think," the Chamberlain went on, excitedly, "the workmen had the wonderful fortune of uncovering two skulls in Her Majesty's presence. Nobody expected it. Everybody was frightfully pleased!"

He stroked his magnificent black beard, which meant such success with the ladies. There was an imbecile gentleness about his fine-figure-of-a-man appearance. He was so ultra-polite that he spoke with a lisp.

"But," said Clorinda, "I was assured that the Vaudeville company were to put on a performance of their new show. . . . The female parts have simply wonderful gowns, and it's said to be killingly funny."

M. de Combelot assumed an air of constraint.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, "there was some talk of it, for a moment."

"And then what happened?"

"The idea was abandoned. . . . The Empress does not like that sort of play."

At this point there was a general stir in the Gallery. All the men had come back from the smoking-room. The Emperor was about to play his usual game of pallets. Mme. de Combelot, who prided herself on being rather a don hand at it, had just requested a return match, for she had recalled that last year the Emperor had beaten her. She had now assumed an affectionate sort of docility, she was ever at his pleasure, with such an obvious smile that His Majesty was quite embarrassed. He could not cope with this, and kept looking away to one side.

The game began. A large number of guests gathered round, assessing the players' throws and expressing their wonder. The young women took her place at the long green-baize covered table and threw her first pallet, getting it near the target, which was marked by a white spot. But the Emperor proved to be more skilful. With his pallet he knocked hers aside and took its place. There was subdued applause. All the same, Mme. de Combelot won.

"Let me see, Sire, what were the stakes?" she enquired, brazenly.

The Emperor smiled, but did not reply. Then, suddenly turning round, he enquired:

"Monsieur Rougon, would you care for a game with me?"

Declaring how bad he was at it, Rougon bowed and took up the pallets, and a flutter ran through the company ranged on both sides of the table. Did this really mean that this man was back in favour? The sullen hostility through which Rougon had moved ever since he first appeared, now melted away. Heads craned forward to follow his throws with sympathy. More puzzled even than he had been before dinner, M. La Rouquette took his sister to one side, to find out what he was to make of all this. But apparently she was quite unable to offer any satisfactory explanation, for he left her with an expression of great uncertainty.

"Oh! Very fine!" murmured Clorinda, at a neat throw of Rougon's.

With these words, she shot meaningful glances at the friends of the great man who were present. It was an opportune

moment to give Rougon their support in the Emperor's good books. She led the attack. For some moments there was a regular rain of approval.

"Well, I'm damned!" slipped from Delestang's lips, which was all he could think of in answer to the silent message in his wife's eyes.

"And you made yourself out to be unskilled!" cried de Rusconi, enraptured. "Sire," he turned to the Emperor, "Sire, I beg you, don't stake France when playing with that man!"

"But I am sure M. Rougon would treat France very well," capped M. Beulin-d'Orchère, a crafty expression on his bull-dog face.

This was a very broad hint indeed. The Emperor vouchsafed a smile, and he laughed outright when, embarrassed by these compliments, Rougon cried:

"But, Heavens! after all, I did play cork-penny as a lad!"

Hearing His Majesty's laughter, the whole Gallery laughed too, and for some seconds was the scene of most unusual hilarity. With her quick feminine wit, Clorinda realized that by their thus expressing their surprise at Rougon's skill, when after all he was such a mediocre player, it was the Emperor who was mainly flattered, since he revealed unquestionable superiority. Envious of this triumph, M. de Plouguern all this time had not said a word, but, as if by accident, Clorinda now gave him a gentle nudge. He understood and went into raptures the next time her friend threw, and then M. La Rouquette threw all caution to the winds.

"Very fine indeed!" he cried, enthusiastically, "a very subtle touch, that!"

When the Emperor had won the game, Rougon asked for a return one. Once again the pallets were slithering over the green baize, with that faint rustle of dry leaves, when a nurse appeared in the doorway of the Emperor's private drawing-room, the baby prince in her arms. Now eighteen months old, the child was dressed in a plain white gown, his hair tousled, his eyes swollen with sleep. It was the rule, however, whenever he woke like this at night, to take him to the Empress for a moment, for her to kiss. The child stared at the lights with that profoundly solemn air that baby boys maintain.

An elderly man, some sort of high dignitary, hurried forward, dragging his gouty limbs. His head shook with a

senile palsy. Bending down, he took the soft little hand of the prince, kissed it, and his cracked old voice croaked:

"Your Highness, Your Highness. . . ."

Terrified by the sudden proximity of that parchment-like old face, the child started violently back and burst into loud yells. But the old fellow was not to be defeated. He went on protesting his devotion. The nurse simply had to tear the tender, small hand from that adoration, for the old man would keep it pressed to his lips. The Emperor lost patience.

"Take baby back to bed at once," he told the nurse.

The Emperor had just lost the second game. The decisive one was beginning. Now Clorinda found that Rougon was playing too well. Just as he was stooping to pick up his pallets, she contrived to whisper in his ear:

"I hope you are not going to win."

He gave a smile. At this point, however, there was a sudden sound of barking. It was Nero, the Emperor's favourite hound, taking advantage of the open doors to come bounding into the Gallery. The Emperor gave orders to take him too back at once, and an usher already had the dog by the collar when the same ancient dignitary rushed forward again, croaking: "Here, old boy, good boy, Nero, good boy!" and all but knelt on the floor to put his uncertain arms round the animal, then hugged the muzzle to himself and planted huge kisses on the dog's skull, repeating:

"Sire, no, please don't send him back . . . he is so fine!"

The Emperor now agreed that the dog might stay, whereupon the highly-placed veteran fondled the animal twice as fulsomely. The dog evinced no surprise. Without a murmur, he licked the dry hands which caressed him.

All this time, Rougon was making one mis-throw after another. He pitched one pallet so clumsily that the cloth-covered disk of lead slithered right into a lady's bosom. Blushing, she extracted it from amid a froth of lace. And the Emperor then won the match. It was now most tactfully pointed out to him that he had achieved a victory of consequence, which quite seemed to upset him. Together with Rougon, he left the pallet table, talking away as if anxious somehow to console him. They proceeded to the far end of the Gallery, leaving the centre of the floor for the dancing which was now being organized.

With kindly condescension the Empress, who had just

emerged from her private apartments, now made a great effort to dispel the growing boredom of her guests. She first made the suggestion of playing consequences. But it was too late now for that. The company preferred to dance. The ladies were now all assembled in the Map Gallery, and ushers were sent to the smoking-room to bring down any men lingering there. While the company assumed their positions for a quadrille, M. de Combelot obligingly took his seat at the piano, which was in fact a pianola, with a little handle on the right of the keyboard. This, with a continuous movement of his arm, the Chamberlain gravely turned.

"Monsieur Rougon," said the Emperor, "I have heard rumours of a study which is a comparison of the English constitution and our own. . . . I may be able to put some documents at your disposal."

"Your Majesty is too kind. . . . But my pet concern is another plan altogether, a vast plan."

And, seeing the sovereign so cordial towards him, Rougon tried to seize the opportunity, and explained his business at great length, this dream of his of large-scale agriculture in a corner of the Landes heathlands. He was going to break up dozens of square miles. He would create a new town, conquer new land. While he spoke, the Emperor eyed him heavily with those tired eyes, deep in which flickered a sullen light. But beyond an occasional nod he made no comment. When Rougon had finished, however, he ventured:

"Perhaps you are right . . . one might see. . . ."

He turned to a nearby group—Clorinda, her husband and M. de Plouguern.

"Monsieur Delestang," he said, "may we have your counsel? I have the most favourable memories of my visit to your model farm at *la Chamade*."

Delestang joined them, but the circle now forming around the Emperor was forced back into the embrasure of a window. Waltzing with M. La Rouquette, half fainting with ecstasy, Mme. de Combelot had somehow just managed to sweep her long, rustling train right round His Majesty's silk stockings. M. de Combelot, at the piano, was really living the music he was making. He was turning the handle faster now, swaying his exquisitely groomed head to and fro, glancing down, now and then, at the body of the instrument, as if astonished at the lugubrious sounds that some turns of the handle produced.

"Thanks to a new cross-breeding effort," Delestang explained. "I have been successful in obtaining some magnificent young stock this year. Unfortunately, when Your Majesty came down, the grazing had not yet been properly built up."

So now the Emperor talked agriculture, stock-raising and fattening for market, all very slowly, in words of one syllable. Ever since his visit to *la Chamade*, he had had a high opinion of Delestang. Above all he praised him for his attempts to introduce some sort of social welfare for his farm hands, with a systematic enjoyment of bonuses for good work, and a pensions scheme. When these two men chatted they always found they had ideas in common, little promptings of humanitarianism which enabled them to understand each other by mere hints.

"Has M. Rougon mentioned his plan to you?" the Emperor asked.

"Ah, indeed he has, and a splendid plan it is too!" replied Delestang. "It will make large-scale experimentation feasible. . . ."

He showed real enthusiasm. He was now most concerned with pigs. France was losing its good breeds. He also intimated that he was studying a new system of artificial leys. But this of course called for large-scale operations. If Rougon's plan came off, he would go down there to apply his methods. But at this point, he suddenly broke off. His wife's eye had just caught his. She was staring very hard at him. In fact, ever since he began praising this scheme of Rougon's she had been furious, tight-lipped, her cheeks bloodless.

"My love!" With this murmur, she pointed to the piano, where M. Combelot was slowly opening and closing his cramped, wearied fingers. He was just beginning to churn out another polka, when Delestang ran across and offered to take his place. This de Combelot accepted with grave courtesy, rather as if ceding a place of honour. But it was not the same thing. Delestang's playing was not nearly so supple, his fist did not turn the handle with the ease or the suavity of the Court Chamberlain.

Rougon, meanwhile, wanted the Emperor to make up his mind, and Napoleon III was indeed most attracted. Would M. Rougon, he asked, not consider the establishment of huge worker cities down there? It should be easy to provide every family with its own patch of ground, water rights, and tools.

He even undertook to provide plans of his own, a complete scheme for some such worker cantonments which he himself had set down on paper. Standardized houses. All necessities provided for.

"But of course, I fully understand Your Majesty's ideas," was Rougon's reply, although the sovereign's hazy socialism tried his patience. "We shall be able to do nothing without such colonies. . . . For instance, we shall probably need to expropriate certain parishes. There must be a declaration of public need. And then, I shall have to see to the setting up of a Company. . . . Indeed, a word from Your Majesty is required. . . ."

At once, the light went out of the Emperor's eyes. He did not, however, stop nodding approval. Then, blankly, though not very distinctly, he said what he had said before:

"We shall see . . . we must discuss it. . . ."

With this announcement, he left Rougon, and with lumbering gait cut right across the Gallery, through a figure of the quadrille. Rougon maintained an impassive countenance, as if assured he would have a favourable response to his request. Clorinda was radiant. But gradually, through the ranks of the solemn men who were not dancing, swept the rumour that Rougon was leaving Paris. He was going to head some tremendous undertaking down in the *Midi*. Men even approached him, to offer congratulations. From the far end of the Gallery came smiles. Not a trace was left of the initial hostility. Since the man was exiling himself, it was possible to shake his hand without running any risk of compromising oneself. This was a great relief for many of the guests. Leaving the dancing, M. La Rouquette spoke of it to Rusconi. He had all the charmed air of a man whose mind is now at rest.

"It is wise of him. Down south, he will achieve big things," he said. "Rougon is a very strong man. His great lack, you know, is political tact."

He then proceeded to grow maudlin about the Emperor's benevolence. As he put it, the Emperor was fond of those who had served him, just as a man is fond of his former mistresses. After the most violent rupture of relations he underwent a resurge of affection. He and his adversary cogged in together. The very fact that he had invited Rougon to Compiègne clearly showed some sort of misgiving at heart. The young deputy went on to quote other facts which did honour to His

Majesty's essential good will. He cited four hundred thousand francs forked out to pay the debt of a general ruined by some ballet-girl, eight hundred thousand francs offered as wedding present to one of his old accomplices of Strasbourg and Boulogne, and nearly a million spent on behalf of the widow of a certain highly-placed official.

"His kitty's for everybody's picking," he wound up. "He only consented to being made Emperor to enrich his friends . . . When I hear the republicans hold the Civil List against him, I just shrug my shoulders. He would exhaust ten such grants, doing good. Besides, it's all money spent in France."

While they thus talked in an undertone, M. La Rouquette and Count de Rusconi both followed the Emperor's eyes. Steering his way cautiously among the dancing ladies, the monarch had now completed his round of the Gallery, a silent, lonely figure, moving in that vacuum which respect left all round him. Whenever he slipped behind the bare shoulders of one of the seated ladies, one could see him stretch his neck out slightly and the gap of his eyelashes would narrow a little as he brought a deep-thrusting sidelong glance to bear on her.

"And what a mind!" said Count de Rusconi, still more softly. "An extraordinary man!"

The Emperor had now come right round to where they stood. Here he paused for a moment, gloomy and hesitant. Then, apparently, he felt a sudden impulse to go up to Clorinda, who was very lovely and very high-spirited at that moment. But she shot him a bold glance and that must have scared him, for he resumed his prowl, his left hand thrust back, resting on his haunch, while with the other he twirled the tips of his moustaches. And when he found himself up against M. Beulin-d'Orchère, he moved sharply to one side and circled round, to approach him from the side, with the words:

"But you are not dancing, *Monsieur le Président!*"

The Judge confessed that he did not know how to dance. He never had danced. Quite unabashed by this, the Emperor said, encouragingly:

"But that doesn't matter, you can still dance, you know."

These were his last words, this evening. Softly, he reached the door, and slipped out.

"How right you are"—M. La Rouquette was repeating Rusconi's words. "An extraordinary man! He keeps the chancelleries on their toes, doesn't he!"

But at this Rusconi, the discreet diplomatist, merely made vague signs with his head, though he did agree that all Europe was watching the Emperor, and a word spoken at the Tuileries Palace was capable of making neighbouring thrones quiver.

"He is a monarch with the gift of holding his tongue when necessary," he added, with a smile the subtle irony of which was lost on the young deputy.

With this, the two men returned gallantly to the ladies, seeking partners for the next quadrille. For the past quarter of an hour an *aide-de-camp* had been grinding away at the piano handle. Now both Delestang and M. de Combelot simultaneously offered to take his place. But the ladies all cried:

"M. de Combelot, M. de Combelot. . . . He turns it so much better!"

With a cordial bow, the Chamberlain thanked them, and worked the handle with a truly magisterial grandeur. It was the last quadrille. Tea had just been served, in the private drawing-room. Emerging from behind a settee, Nero was stuffed with sandwiches. Little groups formed, intimately chatting. M. de Plouguern bore a *brioche* off to the corner of a side table, where he proceeded to wash mouthfuls of it down with little gulps of tea, while he explained to Delestang, to whom he had given half of it, how it was that despite his legitimist opinions in the end he had begun to accept invitations to Compiègne. Heavens, it was simple enough: he felt he would be in the wrong to refuse his assistance to a régime which was saving France from anarchy. He interrupted his story to remark:

"Remarkably good, this *brioche* is! . . . To tell you the truth, I dined poorly today."

Apart from this his malicious temperament was fully awake at Compiègne. He discussed most of the ladies present in terms so coarse that he brought blushes to Delestang's cheeks. The only woman he respected was the Empress. She was a saint. She revealed a piety which was exemplary. She was herself a legitimist and could she have disposed of the throne, she would without doubt have brought Henry V back. For a moment de Plouguern turned to the sweets of faith, after which he had just begun a new gritty story when the Empress re-appeared for a moment, accompanied by Mme. de Llorentz. Standing in the doorway, she bowed a low "good-night" to the whole company, to which everybody replied.

The drawing-rooms then emptied. As they all withdrew to their rooms, conversation grew louder. Handshakes were exchanged. When however Delestang tried to find his wife, she had vanished. At last Rougon, helping him in the task, discovered her. She was snugly ensconced in a little settee for two with Count de Marsy, lost in the depths of that small drawing-room where after dinner Mme. de Llorentz had given the Count such a terrible jealous nagging. Clorinda was laughing loudly, but she rose at once when she saw her husband. Still laughing, she bade the Count a good night.

"You shall see tomorrow, during the hunt, if I win my bet," she taunted him.

Rougon followed her with his eyes as Delestang offered her his arm and led her away. He would have liked to go all the way with them to their bedroom door, and ask her what bet this was that she spoke of, but he was obliged to stay where he was, kept back by Count de Marsy, who was treating him now with doubled politeness. When he did at last get free, instead of going up to bed he took advantage of an open door to go down into the gardens. It was a very dark night, a typical October night, without a star, without a breath of air, an inky, lifeless night. In the background, high hedges made lowering cliffs of darkness. He found it difficult to make out the lighter colour of the paths. A hundred yards from the terrace, he halted. Hat in hand, he stood there in the darkness, drinking in the night freshness as it descended on him. It was like a bath of new vigour. It soothed him. He forgot himself, gazing up at a certain brightly lit front window, over to the left. The other lights had all gone out now, only the glow of this one broke a rent in the sleeping mass of the castle. The Emperor was still up. All at once Rougon thought he saw his shadow, an enormous head, barred with the tips of his moustaches. Then two other shadows passed, one frail, the other stout, so stout, in fact, that it filled the whole rectangle of the window. In this last form he clearly recognized the huge silhouette of a man of the secret police, with whom His Majesty liked to closet himself for hours, and as the fainter shadow crossed the blind again he imagined it must be that of a woman. Then all these shapes had vanished again, and the window resumed its steady brightness, its unswerving stare of a flame which thrust out into the mysterious depths of the park and there was lost. Perhaps at this moment the Emperor was thinking over this

proposal of his to break up a corner of those brecklands, thinking over the establishment of a garden city of workers, where there could be a large-scale attempt to wipe out poverty entirely. It was often by night that he made up his mind to things. It was then that he signed decrees, wrote manifestoes, dismissed ministers. As Rougon looked up, a smile gradually spread over his features. He could not help recalling a story of the Emperor's having been seen in a blue apron, wearing a forage cap fashioned from a page of newspaper, papering a room at the *Trianon* with 3-francs-a-roll wallpaper, merely to house a mistress, and he pictured him as he might be at this very moment, in the solitude of his study, wrapped in grave silence, perhaps cutting out those pictures which he used to stick into an album very neatly with a pair of tweezers.

At this moment Rougon, to his own surprise, could not but raise his arms and cry out loud:

"Yes, it's his little band of followers that made the man."

He turned quickly back, inside. The cold nipped. He felt it particularly in the legs, up to his knees, where the court breeches began.

The following day, towards nine o'clock, Clorinda sent round to him, Antonia, whom she had brought with her, to ask if she and her husband might come and breakfast with him. He had just had a cup of chocolate sent up, but he waited for them. Antonia preceded them, bearing the large silver tray on which their two cups of coffee had been sent up to their room.

"There!" Clorinda cried, as she came in, "this will be more cheerful. You've got the sun, this side. . . . Ah, but how grand, far better off than we are."

She inspected the suite he had been allotted. It consisted of an ante-room, off which, on the right, opened a small servant's room, a bedroom at the far end, a large room furnished in a buff cretonne with large red flowers, and a huge mahogany bed, near which was an immense hearth in which whole trunks of timber were smouldering.

"Good gracious me," cried Rougon, "you should have insisted. I myself would never have put up with a room that gave on to the courtyard. Of course, if you are going to let yourselves be treated like that. . . . I told Delestang the same last night."

The young woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, he would put up with it if they stuck me up in the attic," she murmured.

She insisted on seeing the whole suite, including the lavatory, which was all in Sèvres china—white, with gold ornamentation and the Imperial initials. Then she came to the window and a faint cry of surprise and wonder escaped her. Before her eyes, mile after mile, Compiègne Forest unrolled the swaying carpet of its tree-tops. They were undulating like the swell of the high seas, and in the pale sunlight on this October morning the scene was covered with pools of gold, flooding reaches of purple, all the lavishness of a gilt embroidered cloak trailed from one skyline to the other.

"Come on, let's have breakfast!" she cried.

They cleared a table, on which had been placed a writing pad and an inkstand. They found it great fun to do without their servants. Beaming, the young woman told them again that when she woke up she had thought she was in an inn kept by some prince at the end of a long dream journey. This improvised breakfast on silver plate delighted her, as if it were an adventure experienced in some unknown land, away "there beyond", she said. Delestang, for his part, was astounded at the amount of timber burning in the hearth. At last, staring into the flames, lost in thought, he muttered:

"I've been told that they burn fifteen hundred francs worth of wood every day in this castle. . . . Fifteen hundred francs worth! I say, Rougon, doesn't that seem a bit much to you?"

Slowly sipping his chocolate, Rougon contented himself with a mere nod. He was very preoccupied by Clorinda's tremendous cheerfulness. This morning she seemed to have got up with a most unusual fever of beauty. Her big eyes were aglow with a fighting spirit.

"What was that bet you were talking about last night?" he demanded, suddenly.

She began to laugh, but did not reply. Even when he insisted, all she would say was:

"You shall see all right!"

Gradually, he began to be nettled, and was quite sharp with her. There was a real scene of jealousy. The allusions at first were veiled, but soon it came to crude charges: she had made an exhibition of herself, she had let Count de Marsy hold her hand for more than a couple of minutes. Unperturbed,

Delestang went on sopping long fingers of bread in his white coffee.

"Oh, if I were your husband!" cried Rougon.

Clorinda had risen from her chair, and was standing behind Delestang, her hands on his shoulders.

"Well, come on, if you were my husband. . . ?" she asked, then, leaning down to Delestang, she murmured into his hair, so that her warm breath stirred it: "He'd be a good boy, wouldn't he, my love, as good a boy as you are?"

Delestang's only response was to twist his head and kiss the hand resting on his left shoulder. His features perturbed, embarrassed even, he blinked at Rougon, to intimate to the great man that he was perhaps going a little far. Rougon had all but called him a fool. But Clorinda here signed to Rougon over her husband's head and he followed her to the window, where she leant her elbows. For a few moments she was silent, her eyes lost on the expanse before her. Then, without leading up to it, she put it to him straight:

"Why do you mean to leave Paris? Don't you like it here any more? . . . Listen to me, I will be sensible and follow your advice, if you will give up this notion of burying yourself away down there, in that wretched Midi of yours."

Faced with this offer of a bargain, he became very grave, and outlined the great interests which engaged him, and from which he could not scarcely withdraw. While he spoke, Clorinda tried in vain to discern the real truth on his countenance, for he did seem very determined on going.

"Very well then, you no longer love me," she resumed. "That being so, I can do as I want myself. . . . You shall see."

She left the window without any pique, and was as cheerful as she had been before. Delestang was still preoccupied with the fire in the hearth. He was trying to calculate how many such hearths there were in the whole castle. But Clorinda interrupted him. She had only just time to dress. She did not want to miss the hunt. Rougon went with them to the corridor, a broad passage running the length of the building, like that in a monastery, and carpeted with green pile carpeting. As she made her way down this, Clorinda entertained herself by reading all the guests' names, written on little cards inserted in fine wooden framing. At the end of the corridor she swung round suddenly. She had the impression that Rougon was wavering, and about to call her back. She halted, waited a few

moments, smiling, but no, he went back into his room, shutting the door rather roughly behind him.

It was an early lunch on this occasion. In the Map Gallery there was much talk about the weather, which was excellent for the hunt, with hazy sunshine. The air was brisk and bright, still as a lake. Carriages were to leave the Castle a little before midday. The meet was at Puits-du-Roi, a great intersection of roads deep in the forest. The Imperial hunt had already been waiting there for an hour, the grooms on horseback, in red cloth breeches, with big braid-covered hats, the kennel boys, with black, silver-buckled shoes, made for easy running through the undergrowth, and also the guests invited from neighbouring country houses. They were all formally arranged in a semi-circle, round the pack, kept on the leash by the kennel boys, while in the centre were groups of ladies and huntsmen in uniform, all making quite an ancient picture, just as if a hunt of the days of Louis XV had been resurrected in this pale, straw-coloured air. The Emperor and Empress themselves were not riding today. Shortly after the start, their coaches moved away, turning down a side road, to go back to the Castle. Many other people indeed followed suit. Rougon for a few minutes tried to keep up with Clorinda, but she rode so madly that he soon fell behind. And then, furious at the sight of her galloping side by side with Count de Marsy, far away down one of the rides, he too returned to the Castle, his nose badly out of joint.

It was shortly before half-past five that Rougon was asked to come down to take tea in the Empress's private suite. This was a favour usually accorded to men of an intellectual turn. M. Beulin-d'Orchère was already there. So was M. de Plouguern. The latter was just telling a very pungent story in very delicate terms, raising a great laugh by it. So far, very few of the hunt were back. Mme. de Combelot had appeared, declaring she was simply worn out. When she was asked for a report, she launched into technical details:

"Ah!" she said, "it took four whole hours to get a kill. . . . Just think, the stag broke cover once for a moment in open country. It had had a breather among the trees. . . . Then it suddenly plunged into the Red Swamp and got taken there. Oh! it was a wonderful chase!"

Count de Rusconi added another detail—he was rather concerned.

"Mme. Delestang's horse ran away with her," he said. "She disappeared over towards the Pierrefonds road. And we've still got no news of her."

At once he was bombarded with questions. The Empress seemed very upset. Rusconi told them that Clorinda had throughout been following the hounds in terrific style. Her dash was the delight of the most accomplished huntsmen. Then, all at once, her horse had made off down a side-track.

"Yes," added M. La Rouquette, who was burning to get a word in, "she used her crop on the beast with real savagery. . . . Count de Marsy tried to catch her up and help. . . . And him too we lost."

Mme. de Llorentz, seated behind Her Majesty, rose to her feet. She had the impression that the whole company was looking at her and smirking. She turned very white. The conversation had now turned to all the dangers of riding to hounds. One day a stag which had taken refuge in a farmyard, had turned on the dogs so savagely that in the mêlée one lady had broken her leg. Then they began to make conjectures. Perhaps, if the Count had succeeded in mastering Mme. Delestang's horse, they had both dismounted to rest for a few minutes. The forest was full of shelter—log cabins, barns, sheds. Mme. de Llorentz now had the impression that the grins on people's faces were broader than ever, while from the corner of their eyes they spied on her jealous rage. All this time, Rougon held his tongue and sat tapping nervously on his knees.

"Hm! Supposing they spend the whole night out," muttered M. de Plouguern.

The Empress had given instructions for Clorinda to be invited to come to tea if she turned up, and all at once, there were cries of surprise: there the young lady was, standing in the doorway, smiling and triumphant, with a wonderful colour in her cheeks. She thanked Her Majesty for being so concerned about her, and then, unconcernedly, she cried:

"Oh, dear me! I am so sorry . . . you were wrong to be so worried. . . . You see, I had bet Count de Marsy I would be in first at the kill. Had it not been for that brute of a horse. . . .' But she added cheerfully: "However, we didn't lose, either of us, that's the main thing."

Now she had to tell the whole story at length. She was not in the least embarrassed. After ten minutes' furious gallop her

horse had been exhausted. She had come to no harm. But seeing that she was a trifle shaken up by all the excitement of it, the Count had insisted on taking shelter in a Dutch barn for a few moments.

"We guessed as much!" cried M. La Rbuquette. "You say it was a Dutch barn. . . . I thought you would have found a hunting lodge."

"You must have been very uncomfortable under such a roof," added M. de Plouguern maliciously.

Still smiling, Clorinda replied with happy leisure:

"No, I assure, we weren't. There was a nice heap of straw. It made a lovely seat. . . . It was a big place, all cobwebs. It was growing dusk. It was all very funny."

Then, staring straight at Mme. de Llorentz, she went on, in still more of a drawl, which lent a special flavour to her words:

"Count de Marsy was very nice to me."

All the time that the young woman had been telling the story of her accident, Mme. de Llorentz had been pressing two fingers of one hand on her lips. At the final details, she was taken with such a rage that she closed her eyes in a fit of sheer dizziness. She remained like this another minute, then, unable to bear it any longer, she left the company. Most intrigued, M. de Plouguern slipped out after her. Clorinda, who had been watching her closely, made an involuntary gesture of triumph.

The subject was changed. M. Beulin-d'Orchère spoke of a scandalous case which was attracting much attention in the courts: it was a plea for dissolution of marriage based on the impotence of the husband. He related certain details with such discreet judicial terminology that Mme. de Combelot did not understand at all, and asked for explanations. Count de Rusconi then pleased everybody greatly by crooning some Piedmontese folk songs, all about love, following each by a French translation. In the middle of one of these songs, Delestang came in. He had just got back from the forest, where for hours now he had been searching the rides, looking for his wife. His distraught appearance raised fresh smiles, while, seeming all at once to have taken a great liking to Clorinda, the Empress made her sit down at her side, and talked horses with her. Pyramis, which had been Clorinda's mount at this hunt, had a very hard mouth when she galloped. The Empress

said that she must see that tomorrow Clorinda was given Caesar.

When Clorinda had appeared on the scene, Rougon had withdrawn to one of the windows, apparently very interested in the lights going up in the far distance, over to the left, beyond the park. In this way nobody was able to see the faint twitching of his features. He stayed looking out into the night for a long time. At last, when M. de Plouguern came in and joined him, he turned round, his features impassive. In the fevered tones of an inquisitive mind that has found satisfaction, M. de Plouguern whispered:

"My God, what a row there's just been. . . . I expect you noticed that I followed Mme. de Llorentz out. Well, she ran straight into Marsy at the far end of the corridor. They went into one of the rooms, and there I heard Marsy tell her straight that she was beginning to get his goat. . . . She came out like a mad woman, and went straight to the Emperor's study. Upon my word, I do believe she has gone to present him with those famous letters. . . ."

At this very moment, Mme. de Llorentz re-appeared. She was as pale as a sheet, her hair disordered over her temples, her breathing short. She resumed her place behind the Empress with the frantic calm of an ill person who has just tried some frightful operation which may spell death.

"There is no doubt about it, she's shown him the letters," M. de Plouguern repeated, after a keen glance at her.

And when Rougon seemed not to understand what he meant, he leant over Clorinda's shoulder and told her all about it. She was in raptures as she heard him, her eyes sparkling with sheer delight. It was only when the hour for dinner came round, and they left the Empress's little suite, that Clorinda seemed to notice Rougon. She took his arm and, with Delestang following behind, she said:

"Well, and so you've seen it all. . . . If you'd only been nice this morning, I wouldn't have had to risk breaking my neck."

In the evening, the dogs had their venison, cold, by torch-light, in the palace courtyard. When they left the dining-room, the procession of guests, instead of going straight back to the Map Gallery, took up suitable places in the front rooms, the windows of which were thrown wide open. The Emperor came out on to the central balcony, where a score of people were able to follow him.

In the courtyard below them, from the iron fencing to the entrance hall, two ranks of footmen with powdered heads contrived a broad alley. Each of them held a long pike, with torches of tow steeped in methyated spirit. Tall greenish flames danced in the air, as if suspended floating there. They lent colour to the night without shedding any illumination. All they picked out of the darkness was the double rank of scarlet waistcoats, turning them purple. On two sides of the courtyard was a great gathering of people, the *bourgeoisie* of Compiègne and their wives, pale faces swarming in the shadows, every now and then one of the torches picking out the monstrous verdigrised head of some little *rentier*. Then, in the centre, facing the main steps up to the castle, the offal of the stag was laid out in little piles on the flagstones and covered over with the animal's pelts, the head forward. At the far end, against the railings, the pack awaited, surrounded by pikemen, and kennel boys in green coats and white cotton stockings, waving their torches, disseminating a bright, ruddy glow, mingled with clouds of smoke, the soot of which drifted away towards the town, and this light picked out the dogs, all pressing close to one another, sniffing fiercely, jaws gaping.

The Emperor remained standing. Every now and then a sudden burst of flame from the torches lighted his indeterminate and indecipherable features. Throughout dinner Clorinda had studied every shade of expression which crossed that face, but all she had been able to make from it was a dull weariness, the moody melancholy of a sick man bearing his pain in silence. Only once did she seem to catch him giving a sidelong glance of those eyelash-veiled eyes at Count de Marsy. There he stood now, on the edge of the balcony, stooping a little, morose, twisting at his moustaches, while behind him all the guests strained upwards to see him.

"Come on, Firmin," he said suddenly, as if impatiently.

The pike-men blew a Royal fanfare, the dogs gave voice, necks outstretched, howling, rearing on their hind legs, in ferocious confusion, and all at once, just as a kennel-boy showed the maddened pack the stag's head, Firmin, master of hounds, positioned on the steps, lowered his whip. This was what the pack had awaited. In three bounds, their flanks pumping madly in their greed for flesh, the pack were across the courtyard. But Firmin had raised his whip again. Stopping

short only a few feet from the stag, the dogs all flattened themselves out at once on the stone paving. Their hackles quivered, their howling become hoarse with desire, but still they had to fall back, to take up a position at the far end, against the railings.

"Oh, poor beasties!" cried Mme. de Combelot, with sensuous sympathy.

"Magnificent!" cried M. La Rouquette.

Count de Rusconi applauded. Ladies leant forward, in great excitement, the corners of their lips all a-quiver, their hearts bursting with longing to see the dogs eat. But they were not given their bones at once. It was most thrilling.

"No, no, not yet!" came throaty voices.

By now Firmin had twice raised and lowered his whip, and the exasperated pack was already foaming at the mouth. The kennel-boy had slipped away, bearing with him the pelt and head of the stag. At last, the dogs now fell in confusion on the debris, their savage barking stifled in an undercurrent of growling and convulsive shudders of delight. The bones cracked. There was now great satisfaction on the balcony and at the windows. On the ladies' faces were venomous smiles. They clenched their white teeth. Bright-eyed, meanwhile, the men breathed hoarsely, fingers here and there twisting tooth-picks brought from the dining-room, where they had themselves been a few moments before. In the courtyard there was now a sudden apotheosis, with the pike-men sounding fanfares, the kennel-boys shaking their torches and Bengal fires burning red, setting the night alight, pouring a dense, tropical red rain over the placid heads of the Compiègne citizens packed close on either side.

Suddenly, the Emperor turned his back. Finding Rougon close at his side, he seemed to emerge from the deep reverie which had held him pensive ever since dinner.

"Monsieur Rougon," he said, "I've been thinking about that proposal of yours. There are obstacles, you know, many obstacles. . . ." He paused, opened his mouth for a moment, but closed it again without a word. Then, turning to go, he jerked out:

"You must stay in Paris, Monsieur Rougon."

Hearing these words, Clorinda made a quick gesture of triumph. The Emperor's words passed like wildfire one to another. All countenances became grave again, preoccupied,

while Rougon slowly made his way past one group and another of them, to the Map Gallery.

Down in the courtyard, the dogs were now finishing off their bones, thrusting wildly in underneath one another, to get at the heart of that pile of offal, till it was one carpet of pulsating canine backs, a confusion of black and white, heaving, stretching, hoarsely breathing, reaching out like a living swamp of voracious flesh. Jaws could not gobble fast enough, in this feverish longing to swallow it all. There were brusque clashes, invariably ending in harsh howls. Suddenly one immense hound, a magnificent animal, enraged at finding itself still on the outer edge, drew back, with one unhesitating leap to charge into the heart of the confusion and thrust his way in, and a second later he was sucking down a long string of the stag's entrails.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WEEKS slipped by. Rougon had resumed his dull, slack round of life. He never once made any reference to the Emperor's injunction to stay in Paris. All he spoke of was being checked, alleged obstacles which had appeared in the way of that breaking up of the brecklands. That was something he was always ready to talk about. What obstacles could there be? He could see none. At times he expressed great fury with the Emperor. One simply could not get any explanation out of him, he said. Was it that His Majesty had been afraid he might have to provide financial support for the venture?

All this time, as the days passed, Clorinda's visits at the house in the *rue Marbeuf* grew more frequent. She seemed to expect Rougon to have fresh news every afternoon, and when he told her nothing, stared at him in astonishment. Ever since that house-party at Compiègne she had been living in hopes of a swift triumph. Her mind had conjured up a dramatic dénouement, with the Emperor in a rage and Count de Marsy coming a sensational cropper, followed by the immediate return to power of the great man. This feminine scheme of hers had seemed to her to guarantee success, so when, at the end of a month, Count de Marsy was still to be seen in the saddle, she was very surprised. She now began to feel great scorn for the Emperor. He was incapable of taking revenge. Had she been in his shoes, her rage would have been passionate. What on earth could the man be thinking of in that persistent silence of his?

Nevertheless, Clorinda was still far from giving up hope. She scented victory. There would be an unpredictable turn of chance. Count de Marsy was tottering, Rougon for his part had become as watchful of her as any husband in fear of being deceived. Ever since those strange fits of jealousy at Compiègne, he had supervised her in quite a paternal way, moralizing all the time and insisting on seeing her every day. The young woman smiled; now she was sure he would not leave Paris. Yet, after some weeks of somniferous peace, there he was,

before December was more than half out, talking again of his great scheme. He had been seeing some bankers. He was thinking of doing without the Emperor's support. Once again, one would find him surrounded by maps and plans and technical textbooks. He said that Gilquin had already recruited more than five hundred men ready to go south and work on the land reclamation, the first handful of this new population. This news spurred Clorinda to a fury of activity. She rallied the whole band of Rougon's friends to action.

It was a great piece of work. Every one of them had his part to play. Agreements for action were achieved by hints and nods and whisperings in corners at Rougon's own house on Thursdays and Sundays. They shared out the difficult tasks. They attacked Paris daily, stubbornly determined to win support. Nothing was scorned. The smallest positions won were prized. They took advantage of anything, got what they could out of the most trifling events, working the whole day through, from the day's first good-morning to the evening's last handshake. Friends of friends were made accomplices, and they in turn engaged their friends. The plot was made to embrace the whole of Paris. In the obscurest parts of the suburbs there were men now sighing for Rougon's triumph without even clearly knowing why they should. The gang, ten or a dozen in number, held the capital.

"We are the régime of tomorrow," declared Du Poizat, in all seriousness.

He traced parallels between themselves and the men who made the Second Empire. He added:

"I shall be Rougon's Marsy."

One claimant was merely a name. One needed a gang of them to make a government. Twenty stout men with greedy appetite are stronger than any principle, and when they can count a principle too among their number, they become invincible. Du Poizat tramped round tirelessly, dropping into newspaper offices, there smoking cigars and slyly undermining Count de Marsy; he always had some ticklish story against the man; he even charged him in addition with lack of gratitude, and self-centredness. Next, working in Rougon's name, he dropped his hints and suggested amazing vistas of undefined promise: now, Rougon was a man who, were he some day able to open his hands, would shower the world with a regular downpour of rewards and *douceurs* and backings. Thus Du

Poizat fed the press with information, quotations, and stories, all to keep the personality of the great man constantly before the public eye. Two little newspapers published a write-up of a visit to that town house in the *rue Marbeuf*. Others mentioned that famous work comparing the English constitution with that of 1852. Popularity seemed round the corner, after these two years of hostile silence. The undercurrent of praise was growing louder. Du Poizat also engaged in other talks, gerrymandering which could not be mentioned openly, certain acquisitions of promise of financial support, with the beginnings of a vigorous Stock Exchange gamble on the more or less certain re-assumption of the reins of government by Rougon.

"Let's put him before all else," he would often say, with that outspokenness which the more starchy members of the group found embarrassing. "Later on, he will think of us."

M. Beulin-d'Orchère first tried a rather clumsy manoeuvre. He stirred up a scandalous lawsuit against Count de Marsy. But that was quickly hushed up. He then showed more adroitness, by letting it slip out that if his brother-in-law got back into office, he might be High Chancellor some day. This certainly assured his fellow-judges' loyalty. M. Kahn also captained a team, which did its best. Financiers, deputies, and officials alike were in it, and as they advanced they swelled their ranks with all the dissatisfied men they came up against. He made M. Béjuin into his docile adjutant, and even made use of M. de Combelot and M. La Rouquette, without either of these having a notion exactly what they were doing. He himself meanwhile worked away in the official world, at a very high level, extending his advocacy as far as the Tuileries Palace itself, prepared to grub away for days on end to make sure that the right words passed from one man's lips to another's, till the Emperor himself at last repeated them.

It was however above all the women who tackled the task with real verve. Here it was a matter of frightfully shady doings, a tangle of ventures the ultimate extent of which one never did quite know. Mme. Correur now never called Mme. Bouchard anything else but her "sweety-puss". She took her with her on trips to the country, so she alleged. For a whole week once M. Bouchard was a grass widow and M. d'Escorailles himself was obliged to spend his evenings music-halling. One day Du Poizat met the two ladies with two gentlemen who both sported decorations, but he took great care not to mention

this to anybody. Mme. Correuer was now running two flats, the one in the *rue Blanche*, but also another in the *rue Mazarine*, and this was a very smart place indeed. Mme. Bouchard used to go there in the afternoons—the *concierge* kept the key—and there was talk of a very high official indeed having fallen one rainy morning for some young woman or other, he had come upon her plucking up her skirts to cross the *Pont Royal*.

Further, the small-fry among the friends got busy and as useful as they could be. Colonel Jobelin went to a café on one of the boulevards to see some old officer friends. They played piquet. In between games, he would tackle them, and when he had recruited half a dozen, he rubbed his hands in the evening and said, again and again, that “the whole army’s behind the good cause”. At his Ministry, M. Bouchard undertook a like task, and little by little had succeeded in working his fellow-officials up into a real detestation of Count de Marsy, while he even roped in the office boys, making them all sigh in expectation of an age of gold, while he whispered in his closest friends’ ears. M. d’Escorailles worked on the gilded youth of Paris. To them he cried up Rougon’s breadth of vision, also his tolerance of certain shortcomings, as well as his love of boldness and strength. Finally, even the Charbonnells, who used to while away their time in the Luxembourg park every afternoon while they waited for a decision on their endless litigation, found means of engaging all the little *rentiers* of the Odéon district for the cause.

As for Clorinda, she was far from being satisfied with merely having general control of the whole team of them. She conducted her own very complicated individual operations, about which she would never breathe a word to anyone. Nobody had ever met her in the morning, casually dressed, to say the least of it, more passionately lugging about that ministerial brief-case of hers, bursting at the corners and tied with string, into the queerest of places. She gave her husband amazing commissions, and without an inkling of what it was all about he carried them out with sheepish devotion. She sent Luigi Pozzo about with letters. She had M. de Plouguern escort her, than leave him cooling his heels a whole hour out in the street. At one point she must have had the idea of getting the Italian Government to take up Rougon’s cause, for her correspondence with her mother, who was now permanently domiciled in Turin, began to flow fast and furious. It was her dream to stir

up all Europe. At one point she was calling on de Rusconi twice a day, just to meet other diplomatists. Often now in this campaign waged so strangely she seemed to recall that she was a beauty, and there were afternoons when she went out really well dressed, superbly lovely too, and when, themselves astonished, her friends remarked how beautiful she looked, she said:

"I jolly well need to be," with a strange air of resigned boredom with it.

She made herself an irresistible final argument. To her, giving herself was neither here nor there, she got so little pleasure out of sleeping with a man that it was just a job like any other, merely rather more boring than most, indeed. After the return from that Imperial house-party, Du Poizat, who knew all about the hunting incident, tried to find out exactly where she was now with de Marsy. He had a vague idea that if Clorinda was going to become that person's all-powerful mistress, he might well drop Rougon in favour of the Count. But she was very nearly very angry with him, and denied the whole story. He must think her mighty silly, she said, ever to suspect any such liaison. Then, forgetting that she had denied everything, she said she was not going to see de Marsy "any more". Had it been earlier, she might certainly have considered becoming the man's wife, but no intelligent man ever did anything serious for a mistress. Besides, she had another plan a-cooking.

"After all," as she was wont to say, "there is often more than one way of getting what you want, though never more than one way that gives you any pleasure. . . . I have things to put up with, I can tell you."

She kept a never-failing motherly eye on Rougon. She wanted him to be big. She might have been trying to fatten him up with power for some forthcoming feast. She maintained her submissive attitude, his humble pupil, and with a demureness which was full of blarney she kept herself well in the shade.

But despite all this incessant high tension of the whole band around him, Rougon seemed to see nothing. On Thursdays and Sundays, nose down on his patience cards, he would work his packs out laboriously without seeming to hear the whispers going on behind his back. The band, however, talked about it all, signalling to one another over his head, as if he were not

there, in fact, he seemed so unconcerned. Throughout, he maintained this imperturbability, utterly detached, so remote from the matters being discussed in an undertone, that in the end they spoke quite loudly and made mock of his vacant mindedness. And if anybody did venture to moot his return to power, he would get worked up and swear that even if there was a regular triumph awaiting him at the end of the *rue Marbeuf*, he would never budge again. There was no doubt about it, he shut himself in more and more, affecting complete ignorance of what was going on in the outside world. That little town house of his, from which there was such a feverish radiation of canvassing, was itself a haunt of silence and slumber, so much so that intimates of the house gave each other knowing looks on the doorstep, reminding each other to leave outside that smell of gun-cotton which they bore in their clothes.

"Get away with you!" cried Du Poizat. "He's got us all on a string. He hears us all right. Just watch his ears in the evening, you can actually see them stretch out."

At half-past ten, when they all withdrew together, this was generally a matter for discussion. The great man could not possibly be quite ignorant of his friends' devotion. "He's playing the fool with us," the former Sub-Prefect said again. Damn him, Rougon had become like a Hindu idol, admiring his own navel all the time, arms folded over his belly, with that beatific smile in the midst of a crowd of the faithful, all worshipping him by tearing their very guts out. The others found that there was a great deal in this comparison.

"I'm going to keep an eye on him, you'll see," was Du Poizat's parting word.

But any quizzing of Rougon's expression was in vain, he was invariably indrawn, calm, almost simple. Perhaps this was what he was like in reality. For that matter, Clorinda would rather he did not meddle in things at all. She was rather afraid he might go counter to her plans if one day they did force him to open his eyes. Thus, despite the man, as it were, they worked to make his fortune for him. Yet in the end they would have to make a supremely big effort, if they were to heave him up, and get him placed high enough. But that was something that they would decide on when the time came.

Meanwhile, advancing little by little, things developed all too slowly, and they began to be impatient. Du Poizat's sarcastic remarks won the day. Not that they reproached

Rougon outright for all they were doing for him, but they did begin to baste him, so to speak, with allusive remarks. Bitter, ambiguous words were used. The Colonel sometimes turned up at his reception with his shoes white with dust and said he had not even had time to drop in at his place, he had worn himself running around the whole afternoon, idiotic errands, too, for which no doubt he would never hear a word of thanks. On other occasions it was M. Kahn who, eyes starting out of his head with fatigue, complained of having kept too late hours for the past month. He had been going out a lot. Not that he found any fun in it. Heaven forbid! But he had been meeting certain people on certain business. Or it was Mme. Correur telling some touching story, all about a poor young woman, a very respectable widow it was, whom she had been keeping company, and she regretted she had no power, if she were the government, she said, there was many an injustice she would prevent.

Then all the friends would talk about their own particular worries. Every one of them had something to complain about. They ended up by remarking on the position they would have been in had *he* not been really too silly. There would then be no end to the lamentations which deliberate glances at Rougon himself clearly underlined the meaning of. They were going to spur him till they drew blood. They even went so far as to sing Count de Marsy's praises.

At first Rougon maintained his magnificent calm. He did not always even understand. But after some evenings of this, there were twitchings of his features when he heard certain familiar phrases. He did not get exactly angry. He merely pursed his lips a little, as if some unseen hand were pricking him with a needle. But in the end he did become so touchy that his eternal patience failed to come out, the cards were never right, and he preferred to plod up and down the drawing-room, with short steps, chatting with one or another for a moment, then suddenly breaking off and leaving his interlocutors when those veiled reproaches began again. There were indeed moments when he seemed white with rage. He would clench his hands fiercely behind his back, not to yield to the urge he felt to turn them all out of his house.

"Well, children," said the Colonel, one evening, "for the next fortnight, you'll see nothing of me. . . . We must prod him. Let's see how he likes being all alone."

Then the Rougon who had been dreaming of not being at home any more to them was quite hurt that they should leave him alone. For the Colonel had kept his word, and others followed suit, so that his drawing-room was almost empty now, five or six of his intimates always absent. When any of them did reappear after an absence, and the great man asked if he had not been ill, the deserter would simply say *no*, with a surprised air, and gave no explanation. There was one Thursday when nobody at all came, and Rougon spent the evening quite alone, patrolling the vast room, hands behind his back, head sunk on chest. For the first time he had felt all the strength of his attachment to those followers of his. Shrugs of the shoulders registered his scorn when he thought of the silliness of the Charbonnells, the envious fury of Du Poizat, the sly sweetness of Mme. Correur. But despite this he found he needed to see these intimates whom he valued so low. He needed them to reign over, with the need of a jealous master who lamented the slightest infidelity in secret. Indeed, at the bottom of his heart he found their silliness touching, and liked their faults. They seemed now to be part of him. Or rather, it was he who had gradually become absorbed into them, to such a point that whenever they avoided him he found himself as it were by so much diminished on that particular day. He went so far as to go to see them instead, to make peace with them, after a genuine quarrel.

From now on the *rue Marbeuf* house was the scene of never-ending friction, with all that fever of breakings-off and patchings-up to which married couples come when love turns sour.

Towards the end of December, a particularly serious breakdown of relations occurred. One evening, with no clear reason, words led to words, till they were tearing each other to pieces, and for nearly three weeks they did not meet at all. The plain truth was, they were all losing heart. Their cleverest efforts were producing no appreciable result. The situation looked as if it would not change for a long time, and the whole band were giving up any thought of some unexpected catastrophe occurring and making Rougon essential. They had waited till the new session of the Legislative Body began, but the checking of deputies' papers went through with nothing more serious than two republican deputies refusing to take the oath. This was the point at which the wily and far-seeing member

of the group, M. Kahn himself, ceased to count on the general political situation turning to their profit. Exasperated, Rougon had turned to his Landes project more energetically than ever before, as if striving to conceal those twitchings of his features which he could no longer soothe away.

"I don't feel very well," he sometimes said. "Look, my hands are unsteady. . . . My doctor has ordered me exercise. I am out all day."

It was quite true, he did go out a lot. One would come upon him, striding along, absent-minded, head high, arms swinging broadly. Stop him, and he would tell of an endless round of visits.

One morning, when he came in for lunch after a walk out Chaillot way, he found a gilt-edged visiting-card with Gilquin on it in fine copperplate. The card was very dirty, covered with greasy finger-prints. He rang for his man.

"Did the person who gave you this leave no message?" he asked. New to the house, the man smiled.

"It was a gentleman in a green coat," he said. "He seemed very friendly. He offered me a cheroot. . . . All he said was that he was a friend of yours." He was about to withdraw, when he thought again. "Didn't he write something on the back, sir?"

Rougon turned the card over and there, in pencil, he read: "*Couldn't wait, will drop in this evening. Most urgent, rum doings.*"

He waved it aside, but, after lunch, those words: "most urgent, rum doings" came back to his mind insistently, till they began to irritate him. Whatever could it be that Gilquin considered "rum doings"? Ever since he had charged the former commercial traveller with obscure, complicated commissions, he had been seeing him regularly once a week, in the evenings, but Gilquin had never once appeared in the morning. It must be something of outstanding importance. Exhausting his conjectures, Rougon was seized with an impatience which he found ludicrous, till he made up his mind he would go out and, without waiting for the evening, find Gilquin.

"Some drunken business," he told himself, as he made his way down the *Champs-Élysées*. "But at least, I'll put my mind at rest."

He walked all the way, to fit in with his doctor's wishes. It was a wonderful day, clear January sun in a clear sky.

Gilquin had moved from *Passage Guttin* to the *Batignolles* district. The address on his card was: *rue Guisarde, Faubourg Saint-Germain*.

Rougon had the utmost difficulty in finding that terrible filthy street which runs behind the *Saint-Sulpice* church. He found the *concierge's* lodge at the far end of a dark passage. The woman was in bed. In a voice hoarse with catarrh she cried:

"M. Gilquin? . . . Dunnow! Try fourth floor! Right at top! Door on left!"

On the fourth floor, there was the name Gilquin, written on one of the doors, in a frame of arabesques representing hearts in flames pierced by arrows. But he knocked in vain. All he could hear beyond the door was the tick-tock of a cuckoo-clock and the miaowing of a cat, very gentle in the silence. When he set out, he had wondered whether he was not on a wild-goose-chase, but it eased his mind to have come. He went down again. He was calmer at last, telling himself that he could wait till evening now. Then, outside, he slackened his pace, cut through the *St. Germain* market, followed the *rue de Seine* along, aimlessly, already rather tired, but determined to walk all the way back. And then, just as he had climbed the slope to the *rue Jacob*, he thought of the Charbonnels, and decided to drop in on them for a moment, to just say *how-de-do*. It was such a mild afternoon that he felt quite friendly.

The Charbonnels' room in the Perigord Hotel, opened on to the courtyard, which was a gloomy well from which rose an odour of bad drains. It was a big, dingy room with rickety mahogany furniture and faded red damask curtains. When Rougon entered, Mme. Charbonnel was folding her gowns and laying them in a huge trunk, while, all a-sweat, M. Charbonnel was roping up a smaller trunk.

"What's this! Are you going away?" he enquired, with a smile.

"We are, indeed," replied Mme. Charbonnel with a huge sigh. "This time it's for good, too."

All the same, they at once fussed round him, very flattered that he should have called. Every single chair proved to be cluttered with clothes, bundles of linen, bulging hampers, so he sat himself down on the edge of the bed. He had all his old good-natured air again.

"No, please don't trouble, I'm very well here. . . . You go

on with your job, I don't want to disturb you. . . . Are you catching the eight o'clock tonight?"

"Yes, the eight o'clock tonight," said M. Charbonnel. "That makes six hours more to spend in this Paris of yours. . . . And it will be a long time before we forget it, Monsieur Rougon."

Usually so taciturn, M. Charbonnel, now really let his tongue go. He went so far as to shake his fist at the window. Think of it, two o'clock of the afternoon, and you could not see properly in your room. This filthy light filtering in from an inner well, that was Paris. But, God be praised, he was going to get back to the sun, in his Plassans garden, and he looked quickly all round him, to make sure he was forgetting nothing. That morning he had bought a railway time-table. He pointed to the mantel-shelf. In a grease-stained parcel was a roast chicken which they would eat in the train.

"My dear," he said again, "sure you really have emptied all the drawers? And my slippers . . . they were in the night console. . . . I think there are some papers fallen down behind it. . . ."

From the edge of the bed Rougon watched these old folk's preparations with sinking heart. Their hands, he saw, were shaking as they fastened their parcels. He felt their very emotion was a silent reproach. It was he had kept them in Paris, but it had resulted in absolute checkmate and now there was flight.

"You are making a mistake," he murmured.

Mme. Charbonnel made a pleading gesture, as if to silence him. Swiftly, she cried:

"Now then, Monsieur Rougon, please don't promise us anything! It would only mean new trouble for us. . . . When I think that we have been here now two and a half years. . . . Dear Heaven! Two and a half years, in this hole! I shall take these pains in my left leg to the grave with me. I had to sleep on the inside and that wall there, just behind you, is simply drenched with damp. . . . No, you don't know all, not by a long chalk. It would take too long to tell you. We've used up a terrible lot of money. Look, only yesterday I had to buy this trunk to take back all the things we have worn out in Paris, and all the badly made clothes they've diddled us into buying, and our linen, too, coming back from the laundry all tatters. . . . I shan't be sorry to get away from your Paris laundries, I can tell you. They burn your things with their acids."

She tossed another pile of rags into the trunk.

"Yes, we're going, all right," she cried, "we're going! Another hour of it, let me tell you, would be the death of me."

But Rougon stubbornly went back to the key question. Had they then heard such very bad news? Almost in tears, the Charbonnels now told him that it was quite clear that they were not going to get that legacy of their cousin once removed, Chassu Chevassu. The Government was on the point of authorizing the *Sisters of the Holy Family* to accept that half-million francs legacy. And what had finally destroyed their hopes was being told that Bishop Rochart was in Paris. It was the second time he had come, to win the case.

All at once M. Charbonnel was quite overcome. Giving up his struggle with the little trunk, he rang his hands, repeating in a broken voice:

"Half a million francs! Half a million francs!"

Their hearts failed them. Amid all the confusion of things in the room, they slumped down, the husband on the trunk, the wife on a bundle of linen, and at great length, whining and wheedling, they lamented. If one ran dry, the other took it up. They recalled how fond they had been of that cousin. How they had adored him! The truth of it was that they had not set eyes on him for seventeen years when they learned of his death, but at this moment they were really genuinely upset about him and indeed believed that they had shown him countless attentions during his illness. Next, they charged the *Sisters of the Holy Family* with shameless devices to get their way. They had known how to capture the confidence of their cousin, they had warded all his real friends off him, day and night they had brought pressure to bear on the weakened will of an ailing man. Mme. Charbonnel, who was herself not lacking in piety, went so far as to tell a frightful tale, according to which this second-cousin Chevassu had died of terror, after having written a will dictated to him by the priest. This priest had pointed out the devil himself standing at the foot of the bed. As for the Bishop of Faverolles, he had played a dirty part indeed in the whole matter, robbing them of their honest rights, all Plassans knew them for the fair dealing by which they had made their little nest-egg in oil.

"But you still have not absolutely lost," said Rougon, seeing that they were now beginning to waver. "The Bishop

is not the Almighty, you know. . . . I have been unable to take up your case, myself, I have so much on my hands. But give me a chance to see how things really do stand. I've no intention of letting them do what they like with us."

The Charbonnells now just did not quite know what to do. What were they to make of this sudden prospect?

"It's not worth your trouble, Monsieur Rougon," murmured M. Charbonnel.

But when Rougon insisted that it certainly was worth the trouble, and swore he would now do all he possibly could, saying he was certainly not going to let them go without a fight, Mme. Charbonnel took it up.

"Really, it is not worth the trouble," she repeated. "You will be putting yourself out, all for nothing. . . . We did mention you to our lawyer, but he laughed outright. He said you could not do anything now against the Bishop."

"If you cannot do anything, what's to be done about it? Better give in," said M. Charbonnel, in turn.

Rougon's head had sunk on his chest. Every word these old folk now said was like a new blow to him. Never before had he suffered so from his lack of power.

"So we shall go back to Plassans now," Mme. Charbonnel continued. "That's by far the wisest thing for us to do. But don't think we are vexed with you, Monsieur Rougon. When we get back and see Mme. Félicité, we shall tell your dear mother you did absolutely all you could for us, and if anybody else enquires, don't you fear, we're not the ones to say a word to harm you. Nobody can be expected to do what's beyond his powers, can he, now?"

This was the absolute limit. He could just picture the Charbonnells getting out of the train in the heart of his own homeland. The very same evening, the whole of that little town would be a-buzz with it all. This was going to be a personal blow to him, a defeat which it would take years to put right.

"You stay here," he said, firmly, "I want you to. . . . We'll see if your Bishop can swallow me whole."

He gave an ominous laugh, which frightened the Charbonnells. Nevertheless, they insisted for some time, before giving way and agreeing to stay on in Paris a little longer, another week, at most. Laboriously, the husband unlashed the ropes with which he had knotted the little trunk, while, though it was hardly three o'clock, his wife had already lighted a

candle, to lay the linen out again in the drawers. When he left them, Rougon shook their hands warmly and repeated his promises.

Out in the street he had not gone ten yards before he repented. Why ever had he kept these Charbonnells back in Paris, when they were so set on leaving? It was an excellent opportunity to get rid of them. Now more than ever he was involved in winning their case for them, and he was annoyed with himself when he realized the reasons of vanity which had impelled him. It seemed unworthy of his strength. But he had promised, and he would have to do something about it. He went down the *rue Bonaparte*, followed along the embankment and crossed the river by the *Saints Pères* bridge.

It was still mild, but a keen wind was blowing off the water. He was half way across the bridge, buttoning up his overcoat, when just in front of him he perceived a large fur-wrapped female figure filling the whole pavement, and from the voice he recognized Mme. Correur.

"Oh, you!" she cried, in a complaining voice, "it would be my luck to run into you, so I suppose I must take your hand. . . . I should not have come to see you all this week. No, you are not very attentive, M. Rougon."

And she reproached him with not having pulled the strings that he promised to pull months ago. It still concerned that girl Herminie Billecoq, former pupil of the Saint-Denis School, whom her seducer, an army officer, was prepared to marry if some kind person would only produce the usual dowry. And all those other ladies too plagued the life out of her. Mme. Leturc, widow, was still waiting for her tobacco-shop licence, and the others, Mme. Chardon, Mme. Testanière and Mme. Jalaguier, all come to see her every single day to tell her how poor they were and remind her of the promises she had once thought she could make them.

"You see, I counted on you," she wound up. "A nice way you've let me down! Why, at this very minute I was on my way to the Ministry of Education, to see about little Mme. Jalaguier's bounty. You did promise it, you know." She heaved a sigh and ran on: "So we all have to run round all over the place ourselves, now you won't be our protector."

The wind was cutting through Rougon. He bowed his back and stared down at *Port St. Nicholas*, under the end of the bridge, a corner of merchant Paris. While Mme. Correur

ran on, he was fascinated by a sloop laden with sugar. Stevedores were unloading it, sliding the blocks down a shute formed by a couple of planks. From the embankment some three hundred persons were watching the operation.

"I am nobody and I can do nothing," he replied. "You are wrong to be angry with me."

But she continued, superciliously:

"Don't you tell me! I know you, I do! If you wanted to, you would be everything. . . . Don't try to bamboozle me, Eugène!"

He could not restrain a smile. This intimate tone of Mme. Mélanie, as he had once called her, revived memories of the *Vanneau Hotel* when he was more or less barefoot, busy making his first conquest of Paris. He had quite forgotten the way he had reproached himself, when he left the Charbonnells.

"Now, now, now," he cried, with cheerful mien, "what's all this about? . . . But for Heaven's sake don't let's stand here. We'll freeze to death. As you are bound for the *rue Grenelle*, I may as well see you to the end of the bridge at least."

He turned back and strode beside her, without offering his arm, and at great length Mme. Correur poured forth her laments.

"After all," she said, "a fig I care for the others, let the women wait. . . . I would never worry you, I'd be as cheerful as I used to be, don't you forget, were I not so full of worries. What do you expect, it gets you down in the end. . . . Heavens, it's my brother still, of course. Poor Martineau, his wife's sent him quite off his rocker. She's worn the guts out of him."

She plunged into great detail about a new attempt at patching things up which she had made, only the week before. To find out exactly what arrangements her brother had made about her, she had taken it into her head to send one of her friends down to Coulonges. To be exact, this was Herminie Billecoq, the girl whose marriage she had been fostering for the past two years.

"Her expenses down there cost me a hundred and seventeen francs," she ran on. "And can you imagine what sort of a reception they gave her? Mme. Martineau flung herself between her and my brother in a regular rage. She foamed at the mouth, screaming about me sending good-for-nothings to her brother, she would have the gendarmerie lock them up. . . . My dear Herminie was still in such a state when I met

her at *Montparnasse Station* that we had to go straight into a bar to take something."

They had now reached the end of the bridge. Other pedestrians jostled them. Rougon made efforts to assuage her. He sought the right words.

"It is all most vexing," he said. "But you will see, your brother will come back to you. Time heals all."

Then, since she was keeping him there at the end of the pavement, in all the confusion of traffic turning in on to the bridge, he began to edge his way back towards the bridge again. Following him, Mme. Correur said again:

"If anything happens to Martineau, that woman is capable of burning all the papers, if he has left a will. . . . The poor dear man is nothing but skin and bone now. Herminie thought he looked in a very bad way. . . . So I really am very worried."

"There is nothing to be done," said Rougon with an indeterminate gesture. "We must be patient."

She halted him again in the middle of the bridge. Lowering her voice, she said:

"Herminie tells me a very funny thing. Apparently Martineau has got mixed up in politics now. He has become a republican. In the last elections he put everybody's back up. . . . That was another blow to me. He may be in for serious trouble. What do you say?"

There was a silence. She held his gaze firmly. He followed a passing landau with his eyes, as if to avoid hers, then, innocently:

"Do be calm," he said. "You have friends, have you not? Very well then, count on them."

"I only count on you, Eugène," she said, affectionately, in a very low voice.

This seemed to touch him to the quick. Now it was he who examined her face. He found her quite moving with her plump neck and that laid-on mask of a pretty woman who was refusing to grow old. She was living her youth still.

"Yes, count on me," he replied, and squeezed both her hands. "You know very well that I make all your difficulties my own."

He accompanied her all the way back to the *Quai Voltaire*. When at last she had left him, he again crossed the bridge, walking slowly, and once more interested in the blocks of sugar being unloaded at *Port Saint-Nicholas*. He even stood for

a while, leaning over the bridge parapet. But soon the blocks of sugar sliding down the chute, the green water, the endless flow of which plunged under the arches of the bridge, the idlers and the houses, all merged together, to be lost in a dream which took complete possession of him. He was thinking of a medley of things. Together with Mme. Correur, he plunged into darkest depths. All misgivings were gone now. His dream was to become very great, very powerful, so he might satisfy all who gathered round him more than was natural or feasible.

A shiver startled him from his immobility. He was chilled all through. Night was falling, the river breath was blowing small white clouds from the surface of the water. He suddenly felt very tired, as he made his way along the *Quai des Tuileries* embankment. He felt he simply could not get back on foot. But nothing but *engaged* cabs came his way, and he was about to give it up altogether when he saw a cabby pull up beside him, and a head emerge from the cab window. It was M. Kahn, shouting:

"I was on my way to see you! Jump in! I'll take you back, we can talk on the way."

Rougon got in. He was scarcely seated when the veteran deputy burst into violent speech, shouting above the rattling of the cab as the horse jog-trotted along.

"My friend, I've just had a frightful proposition put to me. . . . You would never guess. I'm choking!" He suddenly lowered the window. "You don't mind, do you?"

Rougon huddled back in his corner, and through the open window watched the grey walls of the *Tuileries Gardens* sweep past as with savage gestures red-faced M. Kahn went on:

"You know very well, I have been following your advice. . . . For two years, I have put up a stubborn fight. Three times I have seen the Emperor. I am now writing my fourth Memorandum on the question. And if I have not exactly succeeded in getting my railway concession, at least I have prevented Marsy from handing it to the *Western Railway Company*. . . . In a word, I have played for time, waiting till we were the stronger party, exactly as you told me."

For a moment he was silent. His voice was lost in the frightful din of a lorry of iron passing them. And when this was gone, he continued:

"Well, just now, I was in my study, when a man I don't know at all, a big company promoter, anyway, came—and

had the cool effrontery, in the name of de Marsy and the *Western Railway Company*, to offer me the concession—if I would give them a million francs worth of shares. . . . What do you say to that?"

"The price is rather high," murmured Rougon, with a smile.

M. Kahn sat with arms folded and tossed his head.

"I tell you, you just have no idea how brazen the gentry are!" he went on. "You ought to hear the whole conversation I had with this company-promoter. Think! For a million francs, Marsy undertakes to back me and get me the concession within a month. All he wants is his whack, that's all . . . And when I mentioned the Emperor, this fellow just laughed in my face, and told me in so many words that if I thought the Emperor was on my side, I was a fool."

The cab came out on the *Place de la Concorde*. Rougon emerged from his corner. He was warmed up now. There was blood in his cheeks.

"And you kicked the fellow out, eh?" he said.

The veteran deputy seemed most astonished at these words, and stared at him for some moments without attempting to reply. Then his anger suddenly vanished. It was now his turn to huddle into the corner. Limply, M. Kahn let the cab jolt him about.

"Oh no," he murmured. "Not at all. One does not just kick people out like that, without thinking things over," he replied. "Besides, I wanted to ask your advice first. I must confess, I am rather inclined to accept."

"Never, Kahn," cried Rougon, furiously. "Never!"

And a tussle began between them. M. Kahn produced figures. No doubt a million was a big sum for a bribe, but he proved that this could easily be provided for by certain juggling with the shares. Rougon however would not hear a word, and he waved Kahn aside when he tried to argue the case. He didn't care about the money, he said. His reason for not wanting Marsy to pocket a million was that giving the man his million was admission of his own impotence, recognition of defeat, over-valuation of the influence of his rival to an exorbitant extent, which would all tend to augment that influence relative to his own.

"You can see for yourself that Marsy is beginning to flag," he said. "He's knuckling under. . . . Wait a bit, and we'll have that concession for nothing."

Then, more threateningly, he added:

"We should all be most annoyed, I warn you of that, if you gave in. I cannot allow one of my friends to be held for ransom like that."

There ensued a silence, as the cab bowled on up the *Champs-Élysées*. Dreamy, the two men both seemed to be intent on counting the trees along the side avenues. It was M. Kahn who first spoke again. In subdued tones, he said:

"Now look here, Rougon, I would ask nothing better, I would like to stay with you, of course, but, you must admit, it will soon be two years. . . ."

He did not complete the sentence, but suddenly changed his tone.

"Oh, I know it's none of your fault," he said, "your hands are tied at present. . . . But, if you take my advice, we'll pay the million."

"Never!" Rougon repeated, very forcibly. "In a fortnight, you shall have your concession, do you hear me?"

The cab had now drawn up outside the little house in the *rue Marbeuf*, but they did not get out. Instead, windows closed, they sat on talking for quite a while longer, very comfortable, as if they had been in Rougon's study. That evening, M. Bouchard and Colonel Jobelin were to dine with Rougon. He tried to persuade M. Kahn to join him, but Kahn would not. No, he was very sorry, but he had another invitation. The great man now became most enthusiastic about Kahn's concession. When at last he did get out, with friendly gesture, he carefully closed the door of Kahn's cab for him, and gave the former deputy a friendly nod.

"Well, till tomorrow, then," Kahn cried, stretching forward. "It's Thursday, isn't it?"

Rougon's heart was thumping when he got indoors. He could not even read the evening papers. Though it was hardly five, he went straight to the drawing-room and prowled up and down, in expectation of his guests. The first sunshine of the year, this pale January sunshine, had started up a slight migraine. The afternoon's happenings had made a very great impression on him. It involved the whole band of them, the friends he put up with, those he was afraid of, and those whom he really liked. They were all pressing him, forcing him back to some immediate decisive action. He did not find this at all displeasing. He saw every reason for their impatience. But he

at the same time felt a rage compounded of all their separate rages rising in him. It was as if the space he had to manoeuvre in had been gradually reduced. The hour was at hand when he would be forced to make a great leap.

All at once, his mind came back to Gilquin, whom he had completely forgotten. He rang to ask his man if that "gentleman in the green overcoat" had called again while he was out. The servant had seen nobody. Rougon gave instructions that if the visitor should come during the evening, he was to be shown straight into the study.

"And inform me at once," he added, "even if we are at table."

Then, his curiosity awakened, he went to find that card of Gilquin's. He re-read it several times:

"*Urgent, rum doings,*" without learning any more. When M. Bouchard and the Colonel arrived, he slipped the card into his pocket. He was disturbed by those words. They worried him. He could not get them out of his head.

The dinner was a very simple one. M. Bouchard had been a grass widow again since the day before yesterday, his wife having had to go to an aunt whom M. Bouchard said he had never even heard of before. As for the Colonel, who always had a place laid for him at Rougon's, this evening he had brought his boy Auguste with him. Auguste was on holiday. Mme. Rougon did the honours, and the dishes were served under her supervision, all very slowly, charmingly and meticulously, without any clatter of dishes or cutlery. The conversation turned to the work they did in the lycées of France. The civil servant produced lines of Horace by heart and recalled the open national prizes he had won about 1813. The Colonel would have preferred a touch more of military discipline. He also explained why it was Auguste had failed to get through his *matric* in November: the lad was so bright that he was always going a step further than his teachers' questions, and that nettled the gentry. While his father offered this explanation of his failure, Auguste munched steadily away at breast of chicken with the sly grin of a much gratified permanent duffer.

When they were at dessert, a ring at the door bell apparently excited Rougon, who had hitherto seemed rather worried. He thought it must be Gilquin, and looked quickly up at the door, already automatically folding his napkin, in expectation of being called. But it was Du Poizat who appeared.

Thoroughly at home in the house, the former Sub-Prefect took a chair a couple of paces from the table. He often dropped in early in the evening, immediately he had finished his own supper, which he took in a little boarding-house in the *Faubourg Saint-Honoré*.

"I am worn out," he murmured, without giving any details of all the complicated tasks of the afternoon. "I should have gone straight to bed, if it had not occurred to me to have a peep at the day's papers. . . . They're in your study, I expect, Rougon, aren't they?"

However, he did not budge from the dining-room, but accepted a couple of fingers of wine, and a pear. The talk turned to the cost of food. Everything was twice as dear as it had been twenty years before. M. Bouchard said he could recall having seen pigeons fifteen pence the pair in his young days. Meanwhile, coffee and liqueurs having been served, Mme. Rougon slipped silently away, and they returned to the drawing-room without her. It was all very domestic. The Colonel and the *chef de bureau* together carried the card-table up to the fire hearth, and now, totally engrossed, lost in abstruse combinations, they shuffled their cards, to play their inevitable *piquet*. Auguste sat on a stool turning the pages of a pile of illustrated weeklies. Du Poizat had now disappeared.

"I say, just look at this hand," cried the Colonel, suddenly. "Isn't it amazing?"

Rougon went up to the table and nodded. He was just about to sit down again in the silence which followed, and had taken the tongs to rearrange the logs, when his valet tiptoed in and whispered in his ear:

"The gentleman who called this morning is here."

Rougon started violently. He had not heard the bell ring. In his study he found Gilquin standing waiting, a rattan walking-stick under his arm. Squinting like a real artist, he was examining a magnificent engraving of Napoleon at St. Helena. He was lost in that green overcoat of his, which he had buttoned to the chin. On his head was still an almost new silk hat, cocked a trifle to one side.

"Well, what is it?" Rougon asked, quickly.

Gilquin was however in no hurry. He shook his head. Still contemplating the engraving, he pronounced:

"When all's said and done, a bit overdone, isn't it? . . . Makes him look terribly anxious!"

The study was lighted by one lamp only, which stood on a corner of the desk. When Rougon entered there had been a faint sound as of paper rustling, coming from a wing-backed armchair up against the hearth, but it was followed by such stillness that one might well have thought it had been merely a smouldering coal collapsing. Also, Gilquin preferred to stand, so the two men stayed by the door, lost in a patch of shadow cast by a bookcase.

"Well, what is it?" Rougon repeated.

He added that he had been round to the *rue Guisarde* in the afternoon. Gilquin then talked about the *concierge*. An excellent woman, she was, but clearly dying of consumption, all because of the house, the ground-floor was so damp.

"But what about your urgent business? Come on, out with it!"

"Half a mo'. That's what I'm here for, isn't it? We'll come to it. . . . So you went up to my room, did you? Hear the pussy? Just think, she came to me along the gutter. I had left my window open one night. I woke up and found her in bed with me. Licking my whiskers. Struck me as so comic, I just kept her."

At last, however, he brought himself to talk of his business. But it was a long story. It began with an account of his love affair with a girl who did ironing in a laundry. He had won her love one night, turning out at the *Ambigu*. The poor girl, Eulalie was her name, had just had to let her landlord have all her sticks because her lover had abandoned her, just when she owed five quarters' rent. For the past ten days she had been lodging in a pub in the *rue Montmartre*, near her laundry. That's where he had been sleeping himself all the week, a second-floor room, door right at the end of the corridor, a dark little room it was, gave on to the inner courtyard.

To all this Rougon listened with resignation.

"Well, three days ago," Gilquin continued, "I had brought a pasty and a bottle of wine. . . . We made a meal of it in bed, if you get me. We turn in early, you see. . . . Eulalie got out of bed a bit before midnight to shake out the crumbs. Then in a jiffy she was asleep, fists clenched, she sleeps like a log, that girl does. . . . But I lay awake. I had blown out the candle and was staring at the sky when some sort of argument began in the room next to us. I ought to have said there was a communicating door between which is done away with now. It

was all in an undertone. Whoever it was seemed to make it up, but I heard such strange sounds that I don't mind telling you I got up and stuck my eye to a crack in the door. . . . I tell you, you'd never guess. . . ."

He paused, eyes staring, to enjoy the effect he intended to produce.

"Just think, two fellows, one a young-un of twenty-five, rather a soft fellow, and an elderly type who must have been over fifty, a sickly looking, thin little fellow. . . . And the rascals were examining pistols and daggers and swords, all sorts of weapons, all new, too, glittering steel. . . . They were talking some sort of *double-dutch*, which at first I could not make out. Then from some of the words I recognized Italian. Of course, I travelled in Italy when I was in macaroni. So I put my mind to it, then I made it out, my dear friend. . . . Those gentry had come to Paris on a mission—to assassinate the Emperor! What do you think of that?"

Folding his arms, he hugged his cane to his bosom and kept on repeating:

"Well, what d'y'say, isn't it a rum business?"

So that was Gilquin's "*rum doings!*" Rougon shrugged his shoulders. He had heard revelations of such plots a score of times. But the former commercial traveller went into more and more detail.

"You told me I was to come and tell you the gossip of the quarter. And I'm willing enough to help you with it, a'n't I? Tell you everything. It's not right of you to shake your head at me like that! . . . Do you think, if I'd taken this to the police, they wouldn't have forked out a nice little tip? But I'd rather let a friend have the advantage. You listen to what I say, this is serious. You go and tell the Emperor, he'll certainly give you a nice kiss for it."

For three days he had been keeping a watch on these "fine fellows", as he called them. During the day, two others always came to join them. One was young and one middle-aged, a very handsome man, pale-faced, with long black hair. He seemed to be the boss. They all seemed fagged out when they came. They debated whatever it was with veiled words. Very curt too. Yesterday he had watched them filling up some "little gadgets" made of iron. Bombs, he thought they must be. He had had Eulalie give him the key of her room. He stayed in all day, in his socks, listening, and at nine in the evening he fixed

things so Eulalie snored, just to put those fellows' minds at ease. Never mix a woman in political matters, he argued.

As Gilquin went on, Rougon grew grave. He was convinced now. Under the slight intoxication of the ex-commercial traveller, and in the medley of all the peculiar details with which he larded his story, he sensed a truth which began to become clear and impressive. Now all that feeling of expectation which he had had all day, that anxious sense of curiosity, struck him as presentiment. And that inward trembling he had felt which had first come on during the morning began again. It was the automatic reaction of a strong man whose whole fortune was now to depend on the toss of a card.

"Looneys," he murmured, pretending to be rather unmoved. "They want the police on their tails."

Gilquin began to snigger.

"Then the police had better get a move on jolly quick," he muttered, then, still grinning, was silent again, patting his hat lovingly. The great man realized that there was still more information to come. He stared at Gilquin. But Gilquin's hand was already opening the door, when he resumed:

"Right you be then, I've warned you, haven't I? . . . I must go and get a bite for myself, old boy. I haven't had my dinner yet, like you. I've been shadowing my types all the afternoon. . . . And I could eat an ox."

Rougon halted him and offered to have a cold supper brought for him. He at once issued instructions for a place to be laid for Gilquin in the dining-room. This seemed to touch his visitor. Shutting the study door again, and lowering his voice, so the valet should not hear, he said:

"You're a decent chap, old man. . . . Now pay attention to what I'm going to tell you. I'm not going to lie to you. If you had treated me badly, I tell you, I was going to the police. . . . But as it is, you shall know everything. Play straight, eh? But I hope you won't forget the service I'm doing you. When all's said and done, no use talking, a friend's always a friend. . . ."

Leaning forward, in a whisper he hissed:

"It's to be tomorrow evening. . . . They mean to do in Badinguet outside the Opera House, just as he's going in. Carriage and *aides-de-camp*, the whole caboodle's to be blown up at one go."

While Gilquin was settling down to his supper in the dining-room, Rougon remained standing in the centre of his

study, motionless, his complexion earthy. He was thinking it over, making up his mind. At last he sat down at his desk and took a sheet of paper, but almost at once thrust it away again. For a moment he looked as if he would hurry to the door, to give an order. Then he slowly turned away again, once more absorbed in some reflection which drowned his features in shadow.

At this instant the tall-backed armchair in front of the fire suddenly shook and Du Poizat stood up, calmly folding a newspaper.

"What, were you here, you?" Rougon cried, unceremoniously.

"Why, of course, reading the papers," the former Sub-Prefect replied, with a smile which revealed his uneven white teeth. "You knew very well I was, you saw me when you came in."

This brazen lie cut any explanation short. For some moments the two men faced each other, speechless, then, as Rougon once again went to his desk, but seemed uncertainly to be asking Du Poizat what he thought, Du Poizat made a little gesture which clearly meant: "No, you bide your time, no hurry, see what happens first." Not a word was spoken between them. A moment later, they made their way back to the drawing-room.

This evening, there was such a violent explosion of quarrel between the Colonel and M. Bouchard, all about the Orleans princes and the Count de Chambord, that they threw down their cards and both swore they would never play with each other again. Their eyes wide-open and threatening, they seated themselves on either side of the hearth. When Rougon came in, they were just making it up again, with preposterous praises of their host.

"No, no, I don't mind telling anybody frankly, I'd say it to his face," the Colonel continued, "there's no man of his stature at the present moment."

M. Bouchard picked up the thread.

"Hear what bad things we're saying about you," he said craftily.

They went on with it.

"A mind quite out of the ordinary!"

"A man of action with the quick eye of a conqueror."

"Yes, what you and I badly want is to have him take a little interest in France's affairs, don't we!"

"Indeed we do, there'd be less of a muck-up then. He's the only man who could save the Empire."

Rougon swelled his massive shoulders and assumed a morose expression, from modesty, but the fact is, he really loved these whiffs of incense puffed right under his nose. His vanity was never so nicely titillated as when the Colonel and M. Bouchard spent the evening, as they often did, tossing such admiring phrases to and fro. It was all an exhibition of their stupidity, and their faces assumed expressions which were so solemnly ridiculous, but the more banal they were, the more he enjoyed their monotonous voices with all this endless false praise. Sometimes indeed he did joke about it, when the two cousins were absent, but notwithstanding, it served to satisfy his great thirst for pride and domination. It was a muck-heap of praise lavish enough for his big body to wallow at ease in it.

"No, no," he said, with a toss of his head, "I am a very poor thing indeed. I only wish I were as strong as you think me!"

He broke off, sat himself down at the card-table, and laid out a game of patience. It came out, which latterly had but rarely happened. M. Bouchard and the Colonel were still going full tilt. They declared him to be a great orator, a great administrator, a great financier, and a great politician. Du Poizat stood by, nodding constant approval. At last, without looking at Rougon, indeed, as if he had not been there, he said:

"Good Heavens, it only needs something to happen. . . . The Emperor is quite well disposed towards Rougon. Were some catastrophe to take place tomorrow, so that he felt need for an energetic hand at the helm, Rougon would head the Government the day after tomorrow. . . . Good Heavens, of course he would!"

Slowly, the great man raised his eyes. Without finishing laying out the game, he let himself fall back into his armchair, his features once again greyish, a shadow across them. However, those flattering voices of the Colonel and M. Bouchard seemed to soothe him, driving him on to a decision before which he still hesitated. At last he smiled, when young Auguste, who had finished laying out the game for him, cried:

"It has come out, Monsieur Rougon!"

"Damn it," cried Du Poizat, picking up the great man's favourite expletive, "it always does!"

At this moment a servant came to tell Rougon that a lady

and gentleman were asking for him, and handed him a card which elicited a little cry of astonishment.

It was the Marquis and Marchioness d'Escorailles. He hurried away to receive them in his study. They apologized for calling so late. Then, as they talked, they intimated that they had been in Paris two days, but fear of a bad interpretation being put on any call they made on somebody so close to the régime had made them postpone their visit to this inopportune hour. The explanation in no way wounded Rougon's feelings. He said it was always an unhopèd-for honour to see the Marquis and Marchioness in his home. He would not have felt greater satisfaction had the Emperor himself rung his door-bell. Since the elderly couple had come to solicit something of him, he felt it was all Plassans that was rendering him homage, aristocratic Plassans, that is, that chill, starchy Plassans which still seemed to him, as it had in his youth, an unattainable Olympus. Here at last was satisfaction of a very old ambitious dream. He felt himself avenged for the scorn his little native town had shown him in those days when he trudged about its streets, a down-at-heel solicitor without any clients.

"We find Jules is away," said the Marchioness. "We had been looking forward to surprising him. . . . He had to go down to Orleans on business, so it seems."

Rougon knew nothing of the young man's absence, but he guessed, when he recalled that the aunt whose ailing hand Mme. Bouchard had gone to hold also lived at Orleans. So he made apologies for Jules. Indeed, he enlarged on them and said it was rather a serious matter, Jules was working on a case of abuse of power, he had been absolutely obliged to go down to Orleans. He said Jules was a clever young fellow, he would make a fine career.

"He needs to, indeed," said the Marquis, without emphasizing the ruin of the family more than that. "It was very hard for us to lose him."

The father and mother now tactfully deplored the needs of our frightful age which prevented a son's growing up in the religion of his parents. They themselves had not once set foot in Paris since Charles X lost the throne, and indeed would not have come now, had Jules' future not been in question. Ever since, on their secret counsel, the dear boy had served this Empire, though publicly they pretended to have disowned

him, they nevertheless did all they could by constant secret wire-pulling to secure his promotion.

"We make no secret of it to you, Monsieur Rougon," the Marquis continued, with delightful frankness and intimacy. "We are very fond of our son, that is as it should be. . . . You have been most kind to him, and we are grateful to you. But we must ask you to do still more. We are friends and fellow Plassanians, are we not?"

Rougon was quite moved by this. He bowed. This humble approach by the two old folk whom he had known to be so greatly on their dignity when they progressed to church at service at St. Marc's on a Sunday made him feel so much the bigger a man. He made them formal promises that he would do something.

When, after twenty minutes' friendly talk, they left, the Marchioness took one of his hands. Holding it tight in hers, she murmured:

"So, that's agreed, is it, dear Monsieur Rougon? We have come up from Plassans on purpose to see you. We are getting impatient, is it any wonder, at our age? Now we can go back much happier. . . . People were telling us that you could do nothing for us now."

Rougon smiled. "Where there's a will, there's a way," he said. Then, with an air of determination which seemed to correspond to his innermost thoughts, he added:

"You can count on me."

Nevertheless, when they had gone, a shadow of regret did draw over his face again. He had paused in the hall for a moment when, standing respectfully in a corner, he perceived a neatly dressed person with a little hard felt hat poised between his fingers.

"And what do you want?" he demanded, brusquely.

The stranger, very tall and powerfully built, lowered his glance and muttered:

"You don't recognize me, sir?"

And as Rougon was unfeelingly denying all knowledge of him, the man said:

"It's Merle, sir. I'm your commissioner, sir. When you were Minister."

Rougon relented a little.

"Why, of course. You've got a full beard now, you see. . . . Well, what do you want, my man?"

With rather dandified gestures, Merle made himself clear. That afternoon, he had met a lady. Mme. Correur. Madame had advised him to go and see Monsieur Rougon "this very evening". Otherwise, he would never have thought of disturbing Monsieur at such an hour.

"Mme. Correur was very kind," he kept on saying, then at last announced that he was out of work. The reason he had let his full beard grow was that he had left the Government Offices about six months since. When Rougon asked what was the reason for his dismissal, he insisted that he had done nothing wrong. Pursing his lips, he intimated as between four walls:

"You see, sir, they knew how devoted I had been to you, sir. . . . After you left they made me put up with all sorts of things, because I was never one to hide my sentiments. . . . One day I all but boxed the ears of one of my colleagues who said something rude. . . . And they kicked me out."

Rougon stared hard at the man.

"So I am the cause, am I, my man, for your being out of work?"

Merle smirked.

"And it's up to me to find you a job, eh? Make an opening for you somewhere?"

Merle smiled again. "It would be very good of you, sir," was all he said.

There was a brief silence. Rougon stood tapping his fingertips in his palm, mechanically, as if at some tension. Then his mind was made up, and easy. He laughed. He had too many debts. He needed to clear the deck.

"I will think of you," he said. "You shall have your job. A good thing you came to see me, my man."

With this, he dismissed Merle. At last, all hesitancy was gone. He went into the dining-room. Gilquin was finishing off a pot of preserved fruits, after tucking away a slice of *pâté*, a roast chicken drumstick and some cold potatoes. Du Poizat, who had joined him there, was straddling a chair, talking away. The two were discussing women, how to win their love, in crude terms, Gilquin still had not removed his hat. He lolled back in his chair, tipping it back, a toothpick in his teeth, for *bon-ton*.

"Well, I'm off now," he said, tipping down a full glass of wine, with a great smack of his tongue. "I'll run along to the *rue Montmartre* to see what my birdies are at."

But Rougon, who seemed very cheerful, teased him. Did he mean to say that he still believed in that conspiracy yarn of his, even after dining? Du Poizat too pretended the most vigorous disbelief. He arranged to meet Gilquin tomorrow. He owed him a lunch, did he not? His rattan cane tucked under one arm, Gilquin waited till he could get a word in.

"So you aren't going to warn anybody?" he asked.

"But of course I am," Rougon replied. "Only I know they'll laugh at me. . . . No hurry. . . . Tomorrow morning'll do."

The former ex-commercial traveller already had his hand on the door-handle. But he came back, sniggering.

"Don't forget," he said, "they may well blow old Badinguet up. I don't care a fig. It would be a rum go, though, wouldn't it?"

"Bah!" said the great man, with a conviction which was almost religious. "The Emperor fears nothing. Even if the yarn's true. These jobs never come off. . . . Providence sees to that."

This was the final word on the matter. Du Poizat left the house together with Gilquin, whom he was chatting with most intimately. And when, an hour later, at half-past ten, Rougon shook hands with M. Bouchard and the Colonel, who were leaving, he stretched his arms and with one of his yawns, said:

"I'm fagged out. I shall sleep like a log, tonight."

The following evening, three bombs exploded under the Emperor's carriage, in front of the Opera House. There was frightful panic in the crowd pressing in the *rue Le Peletier*. More than fifty people were hit. A lady in a blue silk gown, killed outright, lay across the gutter. Two soldiers lay on the flags, in their death throes. Wounded in the neck, an *aide-de-camp* left a trail of blood behind him. Then, in the harsh gaslight, amid all the smoke, the Emperor got down safe and sound from a carriage riddled with fragments of bomb, and saluted. All he had suffered was a hole through his hat, made by a bomb splinter.

Rougon had spent a quiet day at home. All the same, he had been a little tense during the morning and twice had spoken of going out. But as he was finishing lunch, Clorinda arrived. Then he forgot himself with her, in his study, till the evening. She had come to seek his advice on a complicated matter. She had lost heart, she said, she was getting nowhere. It was now he who consoled her. He was very moved by her melancholy, but showed great hope himself. He hinted that it was all going to change now. He was not ignorant, he said,

of the devotion and canvassing of his friends. He would make it up to the lowest of them. When she left him, he kissed her forehead.

Then, having dined, he was overcome with an irresistible need to walk. So he went out and cut through the shortest way to reach the river embankment. He found the evening stifling. He had to have this bracing river air.

This particular winter evening was very mild, with low, clouded sky, which seemed to weigh down on the city, in a black silence. The rumble of the main streets was faint in the distance. He followed along empty pavements, at a steady pace, forging straight ahead, brushing the parapet with his overcoat. An infinitude of lights following away into the darkness, like so many stars indicating the limits of a lifeless sky, afforded a sensation of immense space as he crossed squares and followed streets of which he could not even see the houses. The farther he went, the more he found Paris had grown. It was a Paris which matched him, and offered his lungs a sufficiency of air. The inky water, shimmering with animated scales of gold, had all the vast, gentle breathing of a sleeping giant, to go with his tremendous dream. As he came up in front of the *Palais de Justice*, a clock sounded nine o'clock. He shuddered, then turned his head and listened. He thought he detected a sudden panic sweeping over the rooftops, distant sounds of explosions, cries of horror. Paris suddenly seemed to him to be stupefied by a great crime, and to his mind came that June afternoon, that limpid, triumphal afternoon of the christening, with the bells clashing out in a hot sky and the embankment crowded along its full length with crowds, in all the glory of the Empire at its height, under all of which for a moment he had felt crushed, with twinges of jealousy of the Emperor. Here now the pendulum had swung right across for his sake, under this moonless sky, in a city now terrified and silent, the river embankment empty save for a shudder which shook the gas jets, and in the depths of the night lurked something sinister.

He drew in deep breaths. He loved this murderous Paris, in the terrifying shadows of which he was to recover his absolute power.

Ten days later, Rougon took de Marsy's place at the Ministry of the Interior, and the Count was made President of the Legislative Assembly.

CHAPTER NINE

ONE March morning, Rougon was in his room at the Ministry of the Interior, very busy, drafting a confidential circular that all prefects were to receive the following day. Halting, he puffed, and ground his nib into the paper.

"Jules!" he cried, "come on, I need another word for authority. Oh what a stupid language ours is! . . . There's this one word *authority* in every line."

"Why, there's also power, and régime and rule," the young man replied, with a smile.

M. Jules d'Escorailles, whom Rougon had taken on as secretary, was running through the day's mail on a corner of the desk, carefully opening each envelope with a knife, glancing at the contents, and classifying. At the fireside, before a good blaze, were seated the Colonel, M. Kahn and M. Béjuin, all three quite at their ease, stretched out, warming their soles. They did not utter a word. They were at home here. M. Kahn was reading a newspaper. Sprawling back in utter beatitude, the other two were merely staring into the flames, twiddling their thumbs.

Suddenly, Rougon got up, went to a side table, poured out a glass of water, and drained it at a draught.

"Can't think what it was I ate yesterday," he muttered. "I could drink the Seine dry, this morning."

He did not resume his seat at once, but with loose gait made the round of the room. Under every tread of his feet the parquet vibrated dully beneath the thick carpeting. He drew back the green velvet curtains, to let in more daylight, then, standing in the centre of this room, with its dingy, faded, furnished-mansion luxury, he laced his fingers behind his neck and stretched, in sheer enjoyment of the odour of satisfied power which he breathed in here. It was as if the odour of sheer administration intoxicated him. Despite himself, now, he laughed, all by himself too, as if something was tickling him greatly, and that growing laughter rang resonant with his triumph. Hearing this sound of hilarity, the Colonel and the

other gentlemen all turned and tossed back their heads, without a word.

"Ah!" was all he said. "Whatever you say, it's good!"

As he resumed his seat at the huge rosewood desk, Merle came in. The commissioner was meticulously dressed in black coat and white tie. His countenance was dignified. He was clean shaven, not a hair to be seen on his face.

"Pardon me, Your Excellency," he murmured, "the Prefect of the Somme *Département*. . . ."

"Tell him to go to Hell! I am busy," Rougon said, roughly. "This is really unbelievable! I can't have a moment to myself!"

Merle was not taken at all aback. Quite undisturbed, he went on to say:

"The Prefect, sir, assures me that he has an appointment with Your Excellency. . . . The Prefects of the Nièvre, the Cher and the Jura *Départements* are also waiting."

"Well, let them wait! That's what they are prefects for," replied Rougon, in a very loud voice.

The commissioner withdrew. M. d'Escorailles grinned, and the three others stretched their limbs further, warming themselves at the fire and were very amused by the Minister's reply. He was tremendously mollified by his own success.

"It's quite true," he said. "I've been seeing nothing but prefects for the past month. . . . I *would* have to summon them all! A fine crowd I can tell you. Some are colossally stupid. But then, they at least do as they are told. The only thing is, I'm getting fed up with prefects. . . . Besides, what am I doing at this very moment but preparing something for them?"

He set to work again at his circular, and all that could be heard in the warm air of that room was the scratch of his goose-quill, and the faint rustle of M. d'Escorailles opening envelopes. M. Kahn had taken another paper; the Colonel and M. Béjuin were half asleep.

Outside, a France which had grown timid was silent. Summoning Rougon to take over, the Emperor had demanded exemplary punishments. He knew his man's mailed fist. The day after the attempted assassination, with all the anger of a man who had nearly been a victim, his words to Rougon had been: "*No moderation! People must be made to fear you!*" And he had now equipped his Minister of the Interior with that terrible law of general security, which authorized internment

in Algeria or exile elsewhere of any individual convicted of a political crime. Though no French hand had been stained with the crime of the *rue Le Peletier*, all republicans were now to be hounded and deported. It was to be a great mopping up operation, to dispose of the ten thousand suspects forgotten on December 2nd. There was talk of a movement prepared by the revolutionary party. It was said that arms and literature had been seized. By the middle of March, three hundred and eighty internees had already been shipped from Toulon. Since then, a new batch had been sent every week. In the terror which poured like a temptestuous smoke from that green plush room where Rougon stretched his arms and laughed to himself, the whole country trembled.

Never had the great man enjoyed greater moments of satisfaction. He was in fine fettle. He was putting on flesh. With power, health had returned to him. When he walked, he ground his heels into the deep carpeting, so the full weight of his steps should resound to the four corners of France. His great ambition was not to be able even to set down an empty glass on the sideboard, or toss his pen aside, not make any movement, without the shock of it reverberating through the country. It delighted him to be a bogey, to forge thunderbolts, amid the worship of his friends, to beat down the whole nation with those fleshy fists of the bourgeois who had made good. In his circular he had written: "*Good citizens must be reassured, bad citizens alone made to tremble.*" Thus he played his role of a Deity, damning these, saving those with jealous hand. Immense pride took possession of him. Idolization of his own strength and intelligence became a regularized worship. He gourmandized himself with the delights of a super-man.

In the upsurge of new men under the second Empire, Rougon had long since flaunted an authoritarian outlook. His name stood for absolute repression, negation of all the freedoms, for absolute rule. Hence nobody was under any illusion when they saw him positioned at the Ministry of the Interior. At the same time, he did make certain admissions to his intimates. He had needs more than opinions. He found power too desirable, too essential to his thirst for domination not to grasp it, whatever the conditions under which it came to him. To rule, to plant his heel on the neck of the mob, there you had his immediate ambition; all the rest amounted to various advantages which were quite secondary, which he could always

contrive. He had the single-minded passion of the super-being. The only special feature was that at this juncture the circumstances in which he came back to office had doubled his pleasure in his success. The Emperor had accorded him complete liberty of action, and, whip in hand, he was realizing his long-standing ambition of handling men like a flock of animals. Nothing made him more blooming than to feel himself hated. When sometimes, behind his back, they called him a tyrant, he merely smiled and uttered this profound observation: "If some day I turn liberal, they will say I have let them down."

But Rougon's greatest enjoyment was still strutting before his little band. When he could live in the continual admiration of the ten or fifteen intimates around him, he forgot France, forgot the officials grovelling before him, forgot the crowd of supplicants who besieged his door. At any hour his room was open to those intimates of his, and he had them reign there, sprawling in the armchairs, even sitting at his desk. He said he was happy to have them always in his way. They were like so many faithful dogs. It was not he alone who was the minister, they were all the minister together, as if those men were all subordinate parts of him. There was a hidden work going on in that triumph, bonds were being tightened, he had begun to love them with a jealous love, putting all his strength into not being alone, feeling his chest expand by reason of their ambitions. He forgot his secret scorn for one or another, and even began to find them very clever people indeed, very strong, men after his own image. Above all he required others to respect him in them, he took their part furiously, as he would have fought for the fingers of his own hands, and their quarrels were his quarrels. He even came to imagine that he owed them a lot, and at thought of their tenacious canvassing on his behalf he would smile, and, himself being without demands, he doled out fine booty to them, delighting in building up the glitter of his own fortune.

All this time, there was silence in the big, warm room. Suddenly, after quizzing the signature on one of the envelopes, d'Escorailles had handed it to Rougon without opening it.

"From my father," he said.

With over-emphasized cringing, the Marquis thanked the Minister for having taken Jules into his service. Slowly, Rougon perused the two pages of fine writing, then folded the

letter and slipped it into his pocket. Before resuming work, he asked if Du Poizat had not written?

"Yes, he has, sir," replied the secretary, searching the pile for the letter in question. "He is beginning to feel his way about the *département*, he remarks that the *Deux-Sèvres*, and particularly the town of Niort, really do need a firm hand on them."

Rougon glanced through the letter. When he had read it, he said:

"Of course," he murmured, "he shall have the full powers he asks for. . . . Don't reply to him. My circular meets his case exactly."

He took up his pen again, to wind up with the final phrases. It had been Du Poizat's wish to be the Prefect at Niort, in his own home country, and now, when making any serious decision, the Minister above all took that *département*, the "*Deux-Sèvres*", as test case, ruling France on the information and requirements of his one-time companion in poverty. At last the confidential letter to all prefects was finished. M. Kahn chose this very moment to give vent to his rage.

"But this is abominable!" he cried, and rapped his knuckles on the newspaper he held out to Rougon. "Have you seen this? In the leading place, an article which calls on the basest passions. Here, just listen to this sentence: '*The hand which punishes should be faultless, for, if justice proves faulty, the very bond which holds society together is undone.*' Do you get it? . . . And then this, under the *From Here and There* headline—the story of a countess abducted by the son of a corn merchant. Such stories should never be allowed. They destroy the respect of the common man for the upper classes."

M. d'Escorailles put in a word.

"The *feuilleton*," he said, "is still more odious. All about a well brought up woman deceiving her husband. The novelist does not even ascribe a twinge of remorse to her."

Rougon made a menacing gesture.

"Yes, indeed," he said, "that number of the rag has already been pointed out to me. You must have noticed that I have red-pencilled some passages. And that's a paper which is on our side, forsooth! Every day I have to run my red pencil through line after line of it. Why, the best of them is beneath contempt. They want their necks wringing, all of them." Then, in lower tones, through pursed lips, he added: "I have sent for the Chief Editor. I am expecting him, in fact."

The Colonel had taken the paper from the hands of M. Kahn. When he was seething with indignation, he handed it on to M. Béjuin, who in turn seemed quite outraged. Rougon sat on, elbows on the desk, eyelids half sunk over his eyes.

"By the way," he said suddenly, turning to his secretary. "That poor fellow, Huguenin, died yesterday. That makes a vacant inspectorship. We shall have to appoint somebody."

The friends round the hearth at once pricked up their ears.

"Oh, it's not a very important post," he said. "Six thousand francs a year. True, there is absolutely nothing to do."

However, he was interrupted. The door leading to the adjoining room opened suddenly.

"Come in, come in, Monsieur Bouchard!" he cried. "I was going to call you in anyway."

"*Chef de division*", for a week now, M. Bouchard had brought a report on mayors and prefects who had applied for the Cross of *Chevalier* of the *Légion d'Honneur*. Rougon had twenty-five crosses to hand out to the most meritorious. He took the report, examined the list of names, ran through their files. Meanwhile, M. Bouchard had gone across to the fireplace, to shake hands with the other gentlemen. Turning his back, he raised the tails of his frock coat, to present his buttocks to the warmth.

"What frightful rains we're having, aren't we?" he murmured. "Spring will be late."

"Damnable rains," said the Colonel. "I feel an attack coming on. I have had stabbings in my left foot all night."

There was a silence.

"How's the wife?" asked M. Kahn.

"Very well, thank you," replied M. Bouchard. "I think she'll be looking in, this morning."

There was another silence. Rougon was still turning over the pages of the files. He halted at a name.

"Isidore Gaudibert. . . . Hasn't that man written poetry?" he asked.

"You're quite right," said M. Bouchard. "He has been Mayor of Barbeville since 1852. At every happy event, the Emperor's marriage, the Empress's confinement, the Christening of the Prince Imperial, he sent The Majesties very tasteful odes."

The Minister puffed out his lips in scorn, but the Colonel confirmed the statement. He had read the odes himself. He

found them very neat. He quoted one in particular. In it, the Emperor was compared to a pyrotechnical display. And without any other excuse, no doubt merely for self-satisfaction, in an undertone the gentlemen began to say nice things about the Emperor. Now the whole band were passionate Bonapartists. The two cousins, the Colonel and M. Bouchard, had healed their breach. No longer did they throw at each other's heads the Orleans princes and Count de Chambord. Their contest now consisted in seeing who could praise the sovereign in the warmer tones.

"Oh, no! Not this man!" suddenly cried Rougon. "This fellow Jusselin is one of Marsy's creatures. I don't have to reward my predecessor's friends, do I?" And with a stroke of the pen which dug into the paper, he struck this one off the list. "But we shall have to find somebody to take his place," he said. "It's the *Officer's Cross* in question."

Not one of the gentlemen stirred. Despite his great youth, M. d'Escorailles had been awarded the rank of officer of the *Légion d'Honneur* a week previously. M. Kahn and M. Bouchard were both officers. The Colonel had just been made Commander.

"Let's see," Rougon repeated, fumbling through the papers, "it's an officer's cross in question." Then he interrupted himself, as if a sudden idea had struck him. "Aren't you mayor somewhere, M. Béjuin?" he asked.

M. Béjuin contented himself with a couple of nods. It was M. Kahn who replied for him.

"Of course, he is the Mayor of Saint-Froment—the little commune where the cut-glass works are, you know."

"Then it's settled itself," said the Minister, delighted to have this chance of putting one of his own people forward. "He's only a *chevalier* now . . . Monsieur Béjuin, you never ask for anything. I always have to think about you myself."

M. Béjuin gave a smile and thanked the Minister. True, he never asked for anything. But he was always present, silent, unassuming, ready for any crumbs that might fall, and he gathered in whatever fell from the table.

"Léon Béjuin—that's the name, isn't it?—well, so he takes the place of Pierre François Jusselin," said Rougon, making the necessary alteration in the list.

"Béjuin, Jusselin, it rhymes," observed the Colonel.

This observation was taken as a most subtle piece of humour,

and there was lots of laughter. At last, M. Bouchard bore away the documents, all signed. Rougon had risen from his desk. His legs tended to ache, he said, this rainy weather upset him. Meanwhile the morning moved steadily on, offices were a-buzz in the background, rapid steps crossed adjoining rooms, doors opened and closed, and there were fleeting whisperings which the hangings swallowed up. Still more officials came with papers for the Minister to add his signature to, a constant traffic of them, the machinery of administration functioning with an astonishing wealth of scraps of paper passed from office to office. Meanwhile, amid all this agitation, on the other side of the door, in the anteroom, there was the oppressive, resigned silence of more than a score of people getting more and more wearied under Merle's keen eye, while they waited for His Excellency to deign to receive them. At the centre of it all was Rougon, absorbed by a fever of activity, managing it all, issuing orders in hushed tones in one corner of his *cabinet*, exploding in sudden anger with a certain departmental principal. With one now, he distributed tasks and decided matters, a colossus, rude, swollen-necked, his whole face bursting with vigour.

In came Merle, with that unruffled dignity which no amount of tellings-off could stifle.

'The *Somme* Prefect, sir. . . .' he began.

"Not again?" Rougon snapped, ferociously.

The commissioner bowed his head, and waited till he might speak.

"The *Somme* Prefect, sir," he began again, at last, "requests me to enquire if Your Excellency means to see him this morning. Otherwise, he asks, would His Excellency very kindly give him an appointment tomorrow morning."

"I shall see him this morning. . . . Damnation, let him have a bit of patience!"

The door leading from the anteroom had been left open, disclosing a view of this. It was a huge room with a big table in the centre and red-plush upholstered armchairs ranged round the walls. Every single chair was occupied. There were even two ladies standing by the table. Heads turned cautiously, eyes peered into the minister's room, eyes full of supplication, eyes glowing with the longing to step inside. Close by the door the *Somme* Prefect, a pale little man, was chatting with his opposite numbers of the *Jura* and the *Cher*. And just as he

made as if to get up, no doubt under the illusion that at last he was to be seen, Rougon gave Merle new instructions:

"In ten minutes time, understand? I can see absolutely nobody just now."

But even as he finished what he was saying, he saw M. Beulin-d'Orchère cross the anteroom, and at once hurried forward to meet him, grasped the judge's hand warmly and drew him into the room.

"But come in, my dear friend!" he cried. "You've just got here, I presume. You haven't been waiting? Well, what news do you bring?"

And the door closed on the flabbergasted waiting-room.

Rougon led Beulin-d'Orchère to one of the window embrasures and they talked there in low tones. The judge had recently been appointed First President of the Court in Paris, and his ambition now was the office of the Great Seal or Minister of Justice. But when the Emperor had been sounded about it he had so far refused even to consider it.

"Good, good," said the Minister, raising his voice. "I am very glad to hear it. I will do what I can, you have my promise."

He had just shown Beulin-d'Orchère out the other way, through his private suite, when there was Merle again, to announce M. La Rouquette.

"No, no, I am busy, why does the man plague me?" cried Rougon, signalling forcibly to Merle to get the door closed quickly.

M. La Rouquette heard every word. But that did not prevent his stepping straight into the minister's room, a smile on his lips and hand outstretched.

"Your Excellency! . . . How do you do? . . . My sister has sent me. Yesterday, at the Palace, I thought you looked a little tired. . . . I expect you know the Empress is arranging a charade—a proverb—in her private suite next Monday. My sister is taking part. The costumes will be of Combelot's own designing. You will come, won't you?"

After this, he stayed on for a good quarter of an hour, ever smooth and wheedling, soft-soaping Rougon, whom he called now "Your Excellency" and now "dear *Maitre*". He let fall two or three stories from the halls, he recommended a ballerina, then he asked Rougon to let him have a line to the managing director of the tobacco monopoly, so he could get some good

cigars. His final pleasantry was a shocking detail about Count de Marsy.

"I must confess, he's rather a pleasant fellow," said Rougon, when the young deputy had disappeared. "And now I simply must go and dip my face in a bowl of cold water, or my head will burst."

He vanished for a moment behind a door and, as Rougon puffed and blew in the water, there was a tremendous splashing to be heard. M. d'Escorailles had now finished classifying the day's mail. He had drawn out a pocket file and was daintily busy with his nails. M. Béjuin and the Colonel gazed up at the ceiling. They were so deeply ensconced in their armchairs that one would not have been surprised had they never got up again. M. Kahn ran through the pile of newspapers on the table beside him, then stood up.

"Are you going?" enquired Rougon, who reappeared, wiping his face with a towel.

"Yes," said M. Kahn, "I've read the papers, I'm going."

But Rougon said he should wait. Taking him in turn to one side, he informed him that in all likelihood he would run down to the *Deux-Sèvres département* himself next week, to the inauguration of the work on the Niort-Angers railway. M. Kahn declared himself delighted. He had at last obtained the concession early in March. All that was wanted now was to get going, and he was fully aware what importance the presence of the Minister would give the ceremony, the details of which he was already working out.

"So it's a certainty, is it, I can count on you to fire the first blasting charge, can I?" he said, as he left.

Rougon had resumed his seat at his desk. He consulted a list of names. Outside that door, in the anteroom, the queue was growing.

"I've barely quarter of an hour left," he muttered. "Well, I'll see as many as I can."

He rang and told Merle to introduce the Somme Prefect, then at once, as he went on peering at the list, thought better of it.

"Just a moment. . . . Are M. and Mme. Charbonnel there? Let them come in."

Merle's voice was then to be heard calling: "Monsieur and Madame Charbonnel", and the two citizens of Plassans appeared in the doorway, accompanied by the astonished

glances of the whole waiting-room. M. Charbonnel was formally dressed in a square-tailed frock coat with a velvet collar, and Mme. Charbonnel was wearing a puce-coloured silk gown and a hat with yellow ribbons. They had been patiently waiting for two whole hours.

"You should have sent your card in," said Rougon. "Merle knows who you are."

Then, giving them no chance to stammer fine phrases with much repetition of "Your Excellency", he cried cheerfully: "Victory! The Cabinet has given its decision. We've beaten our terrible Bishop."

The old lady's emotions so got the better of her that she was obliged to sit down, and the husband took hold of one of the armchairs, to steady himself.

"I had the good news last night," the Minister went on. "I asked you to come round this morning, because I wanted to tell you it myself. Well; there's a fine windfall for you, isn't it, half a million francs!"

Happy to see their flabbergasted faces, he teased them. At last, in choking, timorous voice, Mme. Charbonnel contrived to enquire:

"It's all settled? Really settled? They can't re-open the case?"

"Oh no! Don't you worry! The legacy is yours."

He went into details. The Government had not authorized the *Sisters of the Holy Family* to acquire the legacy because of the existence of natural heirs, and also by reason of the quashing of a will which seemed to lack some of the signs of authenticity. Bishop Rochart was beside himself. Rougon had come upon him only the day before in the office of his colleague the Minister of Education, and he was still laughing at the furious looks Rochart had given him. His victory over the Bishop pleased him very much.

"Well, and now you see, he did not gobble me up," he reminded them. "I am too big a mouthful. . . . Not that that's the end of the matter, of course, between us, I could see that from the colour of his eyes. He's not the man to forget anything. But that's my affair."

The Charbonnells fell over themselves thanking him, fawning on him, in fact. They said they would leave Paris that very evening. They were seized all at once by wild alarm. Cousin Chevassu's house at Faverolles was in the care of a pious old servant who was most devoted to the *Sisters of the Holy Family*.

It was quite feasible that when she learned what had happened, they would strip the house bare. Those nuns were capable of anything.

"Yes, you go down tonight," the Minister agreed. "If anything has happened, let me know."

He saw them to the door. When it opened, he noticed how amazed some of the faces in the anteroom were. The Somme Prefect exchanged a smile with his Jura and Cher colleagues. The two ladies standing at the table pursed their lips most scornfully. Seeing this, he raised his voice harshly.

"So you'll write to me, won't you. You know how concerned I am about you. . . . And when you get to Plassans, tell my mother I am fine."

He crossed the anteroom and saw the Charbonnells all the way to the other door, to impress them on all these people waiting. He was not ashamed of them. He was very proud at this moment to be a son of that little town of Plassans and today to be in a position to set them as high as he chose. And all these people craving an interview with him and all the officials bowing as he passed also bowed to the Charbonnel's puce-coloured gown and old-fashioned frock coat.

When he got back to his room, the Colonel was standing up.

"Well, I'll be seeing you this evening," he said. "It's beginning to be a bit too hot here."

Jobelin bent forward to whisper something in Rougon's ear. It concerned his boy, Auguste. He was going to take him away from school. He had given up hoping to get him through his *matric*. Rougon had promised he would find a place for him in the Ministry, despite the fact that the regulations insisted on matriculation.

"All right then, so that's that, bring him round," was Rougon's reply. "I'll get over the formalities all right. I'll find an opening. . . . And he'll be earning at once, since you need it."

This left M. Béjuin alone before the fire. He hitched his armchair round into the centre of the hearth, as if he had not noticed that the room was emptying. He was always the last to go, always waited till all the others had left, always hoping to get the offer of some forgotten trifle.

One again Merle was told to bring in the Somme Prefect, but instead of going to the door to do so, the man went close up to the desk. With that ingratiating smile of his, he said:

"If I may, sir, I must discharge a trifling obligation."

Rougon planted his elbows on the desk, to hear what this could be.

"It's poor Mme. Correur, sir. . . . I went to see her this morning. She's in bed. She's got a boil, sir, in a very awkward place. A very big one too, bigger than half your fist. It's not exactly dangerous, sir, but she's got a lot of trouble with it, sir, seeing she has such a delicate skin. . . ."

"And so?" demanded Rougon.

"I even helped her man to turn her over, sir. But I have my duties to attend to. . . . It's like this, sir, she's very worried, she would like to see you, sir, about some answers she's awaiting. I was just going, indeed, when she called me back, would I be so kind, she said, as to bring her the answer this evening, sir, after work's over. . . . Would Your Excellency mind, sir?"

Unruffled, the Minister swung round.

"Monsieur d'Escorailles, please, that file at the bottom there, in that cupboard."

It was Mme. Correur's file, an enormous grey folder, bulging with papers. It contained letters, schemes, and applications in all possible hands and all possible spellings—requests for tobacco retail licences, stamp licences, appeals for aid, subsidies and allowances. Every single one of these loose sheets had a marginal note of Mme. Correur's, five or six lines of writing followed by an enormous masculine signature.

Rougon turned the sheets and glanced at all the little pencil minutes which were added in his own hand. Then he spoke up:

"Mme. Jalaguier's pension has been fixed at eighteen hundred francs, Mme. Leture's got her tobacco licence. . . . Mme. Chardon's grants have been passed. . . . No news yet for Mme. Testanière. . . . Oh yes, tell Mme. Correur too that I've managed Mlle. Billecoq's case. I have mentioned her, and certain ladies will provide the necessary dowry for her marriage to the officer who seduced her."

"Thank you, Your Excellency, a thousand times, sir," said Merle, with a bow.

He was leaving the room when the delightful golden-haired head of a young woman in a pink hat appeared.

"May I come in?" came a flute-like voice, and, without awaiting the answer, Mme. Bouchard entered. She had seen no commissioner in the anteroom, she said, so simply came straight in. Calling her his "*dear little girl*", Rougon had her

take a seat, after squeezing her daintily gloved little hands in his.

"Anything serious?" he enquired.

"It is, yes, very serious," she replied, with a smile, so he told Merle to let nobody come in.

Having completed his manicure, M. d'Escorailles came to greet Mme. Bouchard. She signed to him to stoop, and there followed a quick exchange in undertones, the young man signifying his approval with nods. He went to take his hat, saying to Rougon:

"I'll run and have my lunch, I can't see any important business left. . . . Only that inspector's vacancy. Someone'll have to be appointed."

Rougon shook his head. He just could not make up his mind.

"Yes, I suppose we must appoint somebody. . . . I've had a heap of suggestions already. But I'm tired of appointing men I don't know from Adam."

Swiftly, his eyes swept every corner of the room, as if in an effort to find the right man. All at once he noticed M. Béjuin, silently and beatifically sprawling in front of the fire.

"M. Béjuin!" he called.

M. Béjuin opened his eyes, but he did not budge.

"What do you say to being an inspector, eh? Let me explain: six thousand francs salary and nothing to do. It fits in very well with your work as deputy."

Limply, M. Béjuin nodded. Yes, very well then, he would accept. But when it was all decided, M. Béjuin lingered a couple of minutes more, snuffing at the air. Then, no doubt feeling that he was not likely to pick up any more crumbs this morning, he slowly withdrew, dragging his feet, in the wake of M. d'Escorailles.

"Now we're alone. . . . Well, now what is it, my dear child?" Rougon asked pretty little Mme. Bouchard.

He had pushed an armchair up to hers and sat down facing her. Now his eye could not help noticing her get-up. She was in a gown of pale pink Indian cashmire, and that very soft material wrapped round her like some intimate bedroom attire. She was dressed, without being dressed. On arms and bosom the supple material was alive. The soft folds of the skirts draped into deep folds which fully revealed the curves of her legs. It was all a very cunning sort of nudity, a seductiveness calculated even to the detail of placing the waist just high

enough to bring out her hips to the maximum. And not a hint of under petticoats showing, quite as if she had nothing on at all underneath. Yet she was delightfully dressed.

"Well, whatever is it?" Rougon asked, again.

Still she said nothing, only smiled at him, sinking back into the depths of the chair. From under her pink hat peeped her crisp curls, and her parted lips revealed the moist whiteness of her teeth. Her dainty body was all subtle surrender. It breathed both submission and invitation.

"I want to ask something of you," she murmured, at last, then, swiftly she added: "But first tell me you'll really do what I want!"

But he would make no promises. He must know first. He was always cautious with the fair sex. And when she suddenly leant close to him, he said bluntly:

"It's something pretty big, I can see, since you are so loth to speak out. I've got to wheedle it out of you, have I? Let's get going, then—is it something for your husband?"

Still smiling, she shook her head.

"Damnation! Then it's for M. d'Escorailles? You two were whispering some plot, just now!"

But still she said no, and she pouted slightly, to tell him he should have sent M. d'Escorailles away. And when Rougon now seemed really surprised, puzzled too, she drew her chair still closer to him, till she was actually pressing against his knees.

"I'll tell you. . . . But you won't scold me, will you? You do really like me, a little, don't you? . . . It's—for a young man I know. No, you don't know him. I'll tell you his name in a moment. . . . When you give him a job. . . . No, nothing very high up. You've only to say a word and we shall both be very grateful to you."

"A relation, maybe?" he asked again.

She uttered a sigh and looked at him with dying eyes. Slipping her hands close to his, so he should take hold of them, she whispered very softly:

"No, it's a boy-friend of mine. . . . Oh Heavens, how unhappy I am!"

With this admission, she handed him everything, put herself in his hands. It was a very senuous approach indeed, one of a high order of artistry, cleverly worked out so as to get rid of any lingering scruples he might have. For a moment,

he even thought she must be inventing this story, that this was merely some extremely recondite method of seducing him, a device to make herself more desirable to one man as she emerged from embrace of another.

"But, this is very shocking of you," he cried.

At this expostulation, she reached out her ungloved hand and in an intimate gesture sealed his lips. She leant forward, abandoning herself against him, and rapturously closed her eyes. As she pressed against him, one of his knees slightly raised the soft skirt of that gown which scarcely veiled her body. In its fineness it was more like a nightdress than a day gown. For some seconds, he felt her as if naked in his arms. Then, seizing her roughly by the waist, he planted her before him in the middle of the room. He was quite angry now.

"In Heaven's name!" he cried, furiously, "do have a bit of self-control!"

Her lips were bloodless. She stood before him, her eyes meekly downcast.

"Yes," he said, "it is shocking! Outrageous! Your husband is a very decent man. M. Bouchard worships you. He has blind confidence in you. . . . No, no, I am definitely not going to help you to deceive him! I refuse, do you understand, I refuse categorically, and I am going to tell you straight what I think! I don't mince words, my dear girl. . . . Even if one does sometimes turn the blind eye, for instance. . . ."

But he broke off. He was on the point of letting slip that he could allow her d'Escorailles.

Gradually, however, his immediate rage left him, and he became very dignified. Seeing she was now shaking like a leaf, he had her sit down, while he stood before her, dressing her down. It was a straight sermon, full of fine sentiments. He said she was offending all the laws of God and man alike. She was on the edge of an abyss. She was dishonouring the domestic hearth. She was preparing an old age of remorse for herself. And when he thought he detected a faint smile curling the corners of her lips, he even painted her a picture of that old age, an old age with good looks no more, with a heart for ever vacant, when under her white hair she would be unable to look anybody in the face without blushing. He went on to analyse her wrong-doing from the social aspect. Here he was particularly harsh, since despite the excuse of a highly emotional nature, it was unpardonable of her socially to set

so bad an example. This led him to thunder against modern libertinism in general and the detestable loose conduct of the age. At last, he came back to himself. He was the protector of the law. He could not possibly abuse his power to favour vice. In his eyes, government without virtue was impossible. He concluded by challenging his opponents to put their finger on a single act of nepotism due to him, a single favour based on string-pulling.

Her head sunk on her bosom, pretty Mme. Bouchard heard him out. She huddled in the chair, revealing her dainty neck under the lacy valance of her hat. When he had got this sermon off his chest, she rose and without another word went to the door, but, just as she lay her hand on the door, to open it, she smiled again.

"The name is Georges Duchesne," she said, "he is a principal clerk in my husband's division, and he wants to be assistant principal. . . ."

"On no account!" cried Rougon.

After this, she swept him from head to foot with the devastating scorn of any unrequited woman, and went away. Even so, she lingered about it, dragging her skirts languorously, all desire to prompt a gnawing regret not to have possessed her.

There was a look of weariness on Rougon's face when he turned back to his desk. He had signalled to Merle, who followed him in, leaving the door ajar.

"The chief editor of the *Voeu National* has arrived," he said, in a low tone, "Your Excellency had sent for him."

"Very good," replied Rougon. "First, however, I must see the officials who have been waiting some time."

It was at this moment that his personal valet appeared at the door leading in from his private apartment, to announce that lunch was served and Mme. Delestang was awaiting him in the sitting-room. Rougon started forward.

"Tell them to serve at once," he said. "Hard luck, but I'll have to see that crowd later. I'm starving, anyway."

He craned forward, to see what the situation was. The anteroom was still full. Not an official, not an applicant, had moved. The three prefects were still chatting in their corner. The two ladies standing by the table were still there, rather wearily supporting themselves on it with their fingertips. The same faces, in the same places, rigid, silent, along the walls, their backs up against the red plush. And so, telling Merle

to keep back the Somme Prefect and the chief editor of the *Voeu National*, he went to lunch.

Mme. Rougon was not very well. The day before, she had left for the Midi, where she was to spend a month. She had an uncle over Pau way. Delestang had undertaken a very important mission on agricultural matters, and had been in Italy for the past six weeks. This was how it was that, seeing that Clorinda wanted a long talk with him anyway, Rougon had asked her in to a "bachelor" lunch at the Ministry.

She had been waiting patiently, turning the pages of a treatise on administrative law, which she found lying about.

"You must be starving," he cried, cheerfully, "I've been swamped out, this morning."

Offering her his arm, he led the way to the dining-room, a huge apartment, in which the little table set for two over against the window seemed lost. Two stalwart footmen waited on them. Rougon and Clorinda had soon finished their meal. They were both of them ascetic by nature. A few radishes, a slice of cold salmon, some grilled chops with potato purée, and a bite of cheese. Not a drop of wine. Rougon never drank anything but water in the morning. Throughout lunch, they scarcely exchanged a dozen words. Then, as soon as the two footmen who had waited on them had brought coffee and liqueurs, the young woman signed to him with her eyebrows. He understood perfectly.

"Thank you," he said, to the men, "you can go now. I'll ring if I want anything."

The servants disappeared. Only now, Clorinda got up from the table, and patted her skirts to get the crumbs off them. She was wearing a black silk frock of such complexity, with so many flounces, that she was over-wrapped in it all and you could not make out where hips ended and bust began.

"What a barn of a place," she murmured, going to the far end of the room. "It's the sort of place for a wedding breakfast or a regimental dinner, this dining-room of yours!" She came back towards him. "I could do with my cigarette, though," she said.

"Hell!" said Rougon, "the fact is, there's nothing at all here to smoke. Not being a smoker myself."

With a roguish wink, from her bag she drew a dainty gold-embroidered red-silk pouch, no bigger than a little money purse, and with her dainty fingertips rolled a cigarette. Then,

neither of them wanting to bring the footmen back, a hunt for matches began, till, at the corner of a sideboard, they found three, loose. She harvested them carefully. Then, cigarette dangling from her lips, she stretched out again in the armchair and sipped her coffee, gazing the while at Rougon, and smiling.

"Well, I am all attention," he said, with a responsive smile on his lips too. "You had something to say to me. Talk away."

She gave an airy wave of her hand.

"Oh yes," she said. "I have had a letter from my husband. He finds Turin dull. He was delighted to have the job, thanks to you. But he's anxious not to be forgotten, away there. However, there's time to discuss that. No hurry."

She went on smoking and gazing at him with that exasperating smile. Gradually, Rougon had accustomed himself to seeing her without being plagued by those questions which formerly used to aggravate his curiosity. In the end, she had become just a habit. He accepted her now as she was. She had her pigeon-hole. He knew her, her eccentricities no longer shocked. Yet the truth was that he still knew little enough definitely about her. He was as ignorant of her as he had been in the early days. She was still a complex character, both childlike and profound, so silly as a rule, yet at times so outstandingly subtle, and she was also both a very gentle and a very malicious character. When some sudden act of hers or some inexplicable pronouncement did still astonish him, he merely shrugged it away, in a stout masculine way, telling himself that all women were the same. By this he meant to convey great scorn for the sex, which all went to make that smile of hers, so unforceful yet so ferocious, showing the tips of white teeth between red lips, a most tantalizing smile.

"What do you keep looking at me for?" he demanded, at last, when those wide-open, staring eyes finally made him feel quite uneasy. "Is there something about me you don't like?"

Two wrinkles now lent her lips greater hardness, as a hidden thought glowed from the depths of her eyes, but almost at once she broke into that lovely laugh of hers. She blew thin coils of smoke from her lips and murmured:

"Not at all. I find you just as you should be. . . . I was only thinking of something, my dear. Do you know that you've been very lucky?"

"How do you mean?"

"Of course you have. . . . Here you are at the top, where you

wanted to get. Everybody's put their shoulder to it, and circumstances too have helped you."

He was going to reply, when there was a knock at the door. With an instinctive movement, Clorinda hid her cigarette behind her skirts. It was a clerk. He had brought His Excellency a very urgent despatch. Morosely, Rougon read the communication and told the clerk the lines on which to draft a reply. Then, closing the door noisily, he came back to his chair.

"Yes," he agreed, "I have had very devoted friends. I am trying to remember them, too. . . . And you are right, I have to be grateful to circumstances. Often a man can do nothing when the facts of his position do not help him."

Saying this slowly, he watched her under lowered eyelids, half hiding the way he was studying her. Why did she make this reference to his luck? What did she really know about the favourable circumstances she was referring to? Had Du Poizat been talking? But from her smiling, dreamy expression, apparently prompted by some sentimental remembrance, he felt sure she must be thinking of something else and probably knew nothing at all about that attempted assassination. He himself was forgetting it all. He would rather not delve too much into his memory. There was a moment in his life which in the last resort now seemed very hazy, till he could believe that it was solely to his friends' devotion that he owed his lofty position.

"I had no ambitions," he went on, "I was pushed into it. But, after all, it has all been for the best. If I succeed in doing some good, I shall be content."

He finished his coffee. Clorinda rolled a second cigarette.

"Do you remember," she murmured, "two years ago, when you had just left the Government, I interrogated you, I wanted to know whatever had come over you? Were you merely being very cunning when you came out as you did? After all, you might tell me now. . . . Come on, out with it—between you and me, had you a definite plan?"

"One always does have a plan," he replied, craftily. "I felt I was falling, and I preferred to make the jump myself."

"And has your plan worked out? Have things gone just as you envisaged?"

He squinted sidelong at her, as one intimate to another in private.

"Of course not, you know that yourself, things never do

come out. . . . All that matters is getting there." He broke off, to suggest a liqueur. "What shall it be? *Curaçao* or *Chartreuse*?"

She said she would have a little glass of *Chartreuse*. As he was pouring it out, there came another knock. Once again, with a gesture of impatience, she concealed her cigarette. Furious, Rougon rose to his feet, still holding the bottle. This time it was a letter, sealed with a huge seal. He swept through it with one glance, thrust it into his coat pocket, and said:

"In order! But don't let me be disturbed again! Is that clear?"

When he came back to her, Clorinda moistened her lips with the *Chartreuse*, sipping it drop by drop, looking down all the time, with gleaming eyes. A new wave of that emotion which always masked her expression from him had taken possession of her. In a very low voice, elbows on the table, she said:

"No, my dear, you never will know all that has been done for you."

He drew nearer, and planted his elbows on the table just as she had done.

"Good Lord!" he cried, quickly, "that's very true, you needn't tell me! But there's no need to be cagey any more, is there? Tell me what you did yourself!"

With her chin she said *no*, very slowly, the cigarette firmly nipped between her lips.

"Then it was something terrible? Perhaps you are afraid I might not be able to square up to my debt? Wait, let me try to guess. . . . You wrote to the Pope and unbeknownst to me you steeped some sort of magic in my crock?"

This teasing remark, however, only served to annoy her. She threatened to leave him if he went on like that.

"No mockery of the faith," she said. "It would only bring you misfortune."

When she was calmed again, she waved aside the cigarette smoke, which seemed to hinder him, and in a special sort of voice said:

'All I did was to see a lot of people. I made some friends for you.'

She felt a disturbing need to tell him the whole story. She would have liked him to be aware just how she had worked to bring him success. This admission that she had now made was a first break in the brooding bitterness she had concealed so

long. Had he now pressed her, she would have given him precise details. It was this step back into the past that made her so radiant with laughter, rather wild with it, indeed, her skin warm with a golden flue of moisture.

"Really," she assured him, "it's true. Men most hostile to your ideas, too, whom I had to win over for you, my dear."

Rougon had turned very pale. Now he had understood. But all he said was: "I see!"

He tried now to avoid the subject, but, quite calmly, though brazenly, she forced her all-embracing dark eyes on him, with a throaty laugh, till he yielded, and did question her.

"Marsy, you mean?"

Puffing a cloud of smoke over her shoulder, she nodded assent.

"Rusconi?"

Another nod of assent.

"M. Lebeau, M. de Salneuve, M. Guyot-Laplanche?"

Assent followed assent. But at the mention of M. de Plouguern, she protested. That one, no! She drained her *Chartreuse*, and licked her lips quickly, her face triumphant.

Rougon had risen to his feet. He strode to the far end of the room, then came back to her. Now, his lips at the nape of her neck, he put the question plainly:

"Then why not with me?"

Swiftly, she swung round, afraid lest he should press his lips to her neck.

"With you? But what good would that do? It would be pointless, with you. . . . What a stupid thing to say! I don't need to canvass you to yourself, do I?"

And when he stared at her, suddenly pale with anger, she just burst into loud laughter.

"Oh, what a child he is! One can't have one's little joke, even, he sucks it all in. . . . Come, my dear, do you really think me capable of such traffic? And, what's more, all just to suit your book! Besides, if I had committed all that foulness, I certainly should never have told you. . . . No, you really are very funny indeed!"

For a moment Rougon was quite disconcerted, but the ironical way in which she said she had been fibbing merely made her still more exasperating, while her whole person, that throaty laughter, that glint in her eyes, merely repeated her assent to what he suspected. He reached out to put his arms

round her waist, when for the third time there was a knock at the door.

"Then let 'em come," she muttered, "I'm not hiding my cigarette any more.

A commissioner entered, out of breath, stammering that His Excellency the Minister of Justice simply must speak to His Excellency, and out of the corner of one eye the man stared at the woman who stood there actually smoking a cigarette.

"Tell him I have gone out," Rougon shouted. "I am in to nobody, understand?"

When, bowing, the commissioner had backed out, Rougon went wild with fury. With his fists he banged at the furniture. They couldn't even let him breathe now! Only last night they had hauled him out of the bathroom while he was shaving! Firmly, Clorinda strode to the door.

"Just a moment," she said, "I'll soon stop all that."

She took the keys and double-locked the door from the inside.

"There, now they can knock as much as they like!"

Coming back towards him, she stood by the window and rolled yet another cigarette. He thought the moment had come when she would at last yield. He went up to her and from behind murmured into her neck:

"Clorinda!"

She did not stir. He tried again, still more softly:

"Clorinda, why do you not want to?"

He had dropped formal speech, but his loving "thou" left her unmoved. She just shook her head, not very forcibly, though, as if she wanted to egg him on and prompt him further. But he was suddenly all timidity, afraid to touch her, like a schoolboy whose first success in love paralyses. Then, in the end, he did kiss her, roughly, pressing his lips into her neck where the hair began. Only then did she swing round. But she was all scorn. She cried:

"What, is this going to begin all over again, my dear? I thought these mad fits of yours were over. . . . What a queer man you do seem to be, kissing women after thinking it over for eighteen months."

He lowered his head and charged at her, seizing one of her hands, to devour it with kisses. She just let him, but taunting him all the time, without however getting angry.

"So long as you don't bite my fingers," she said, "that's all I would ask of you. . . . Why, I would never have thought it of you! You had become so well behaved when I used to go to see you in the *rue Marbeuf*, and here you are, all crazy again, just because I tell you some dirty goings on which, Good Heavens, never even entered my head. Well, you are a nice sort of person, I must say, my dear. . . . I don't stay alight quite so long, you know. That's all an old story, now. You did not want me then, I don't want you any longer."

"Listen to me," he murmured, "anything you ask. I will do anything, give you anything."

But she repeated her *no*, punishing him in the flesh for his former scorn for her and finding in this her first taste of revenge. She had craved to see him all powerful, so that she might thus refuse him and flaunt his male might.

"Never, never," she repeated, many times. "Have you really forgotten? Never!"

Then, quite indecently, Rougon grovelled at her feet. He embraced her skirts, he kissed her knees through the silk of her gown. This however was not Mme. Bouchard's soft material. These were exasperatingly thick wads of material, though her odour in it all intoxicated him. Shrugging her shoulders, she let him have his will with her petticoats, but then he grew bolder, his hands slipped under the hem, seeking her feet, rising beyond the edge of the flounces.

"Take care!" she suddenly said, very calmly.

And then, as he plunged his hands deeper, she swiftly reached down and pressed the glowing end of her cigarette into his forehead. With a loud cry, he fell back, then would have rushed at her again, but she slipped away from him and, back to the wall, stood holding a bell-pull against the mantel-piece.

"I'll ring!" she cried. "I shall say you locked me in!"

He spun round, clenching his temples with his closed fists, his body shaken by a terrible convulsion. For some seconds, he was unable to move an inch, afraid he would hear his own head explode. All at once he drew himself up to recover his calm. His ears were still drumming, his eyes blinded with red flames.

"I am an animal!" he muttered. "How stupid!"

Clorinda laughed, a victorious laugh, and lectured him. He was wrong to despise women. In time he would come to

recognize that there were women who were very strong. Then, quite recovering her jolly, girl-like manner:

"We're not angry, are we, now?" she said. . . . "Let's be clear: never again ask *that* of me. I don't want it! I don't like it!"

Ashamed of himself, Rougon prowled up and down. She relinquished her hold on the bell-pull and went to the table, where she sat down and, dissolving some lumps of sugar in a glass of water, drained the sherbet.

"As I was saying," she suddenly resumed, calmly, "I had a letter from my husband yesterday. I had so much on hand this morning that I might have let you down for lunch, had I not wanted to show you it. Here it is. In it he reminds you of your promises."

Rougon took the letter and read it as he walked up and down, then with a gesture of weariness, tossed it on the table in front of her.

"Well?" she asked.

He did not reply at once. Shoulders hunched, he yawned faintly.

"He's a fool," he said, at last.

She was very hurt. For some time she had refused to let anyone seem to question her husband's capabilities. For a moment she lowered her head, while repressing the little jerks of indignation which convulsed her hands. But little by little she rid herself of her schoolgirl submissiveness and seemed to drain sufficient strength from Rougon to face him, an opponent to be feared.

"If we were to show this letter, that would be the end of him," Rougon said, driven to avenge the wife's resistance on the husband. "That would be the easiest of jobs."

"You exaggerate, my dear," she replied, after a silence. "There was a time when you swore he had the world at his feet. He possesses very sound and very real qualities. . . . It is not the really strong men who go farthest."

Rougon went on prowling up and down. His shoulders declared violent disagreement.

"It is, after all, in your own interests to have him a Minister. You could then count on one friend. If the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce really does retire for health reasons, as is hinted, what a splendid opportunity. My husband is able, and this mission to Italy has brought him to the Emperor's

notice. . . . You yourself know that the Emperor likes him quite a lot. They get on together. They have the same ideas. . . . One word from you would settle the matter."

He circled the room two or three times more before replying. Then, halting as he reached her, he said:

"Very well, then, in spite of everything. . . . There are bigger fools. . . . But I do it solely for you. I mean to disarm you. There isn't a drop of goodwill in you, is there? Admit it, you are a bad forgetter, aren't you?"

He said it laughingly. She laughed herself and agreed:

"Yes, I am a bad forgetter. . . . I keep it chalked up against you."

Just as she was going, he kept her back a moment, in the doorway. Twice they shook hands convulsively, without a word passing.

Once alone, Rougon went straight to his office. The large room was empty. He seated himself at his desk, propped his elbows on the blotting pad and breathed hard in the silence. His eyelids sank and for nearly ten minutes a fit of drowsiness possessed him. But he suddenly started up and stretched, then rang. Merle appeared.

"I expect the Prefect of the *Somme Département* is still waiting, isn't he? Show him in."

Pale but smiling, drawing his modest frame fully erect, the *Somme* Prefect entered, and with rigid courtesy presented himself to the Minister. Still rather drowsy, Rougon told him to take a seat and waited for a few moments.

"Well," he said, at last, "I will tell you why I sent for you. There are instructions which should be given verbally. . . . As no doubt you are well aware, the revolutionary party is raising its head. We were within an ace of a terrible catastrophe. The result is that the country wants reassuring. It needs to be able to feel itself under the stern protection of the régime. For his part, His Majesty has resolved to make examples, for hitherto they have greatly taken advantage of his kindness. . . ."

He spoke slowly, lolling back in his armchair, toying with a large seal with an agate handle. The Prefect approved every stage of the argument with a quick little nod.

"Your *département*," the Minister continued, "is one of the worst. The republican gangrene. . . ."

"I am making every possible effort. . . ." the Prefect began.

"Don't interrupt me, please. . . . The repression needs to be

startling. It is to get that point clear with you that I wished to see you. . . . Here in the Ministry we have not been idle. We have drawn up a list. . . .”

He fumbled with some papers, then, taking out a file, turned the pages.

“We felt obliged to portion out the arrests considered necessary in the whole country. The number in each *département* has been fixed in proportion to the effect we desire to make. . . . Get our purpose clear. Well, and so, here we are, *Haute-Marne*, where the republicans are only a very tiny minority, only three arrests. The *Meuse*, on the other hand—fifteen arrests. . . . And now your *département*, hm? The *Somme*, yes, that’s it, the *Somme département*. . . .”

He turned the sheets, his heavy eyelids blinking. At last he looked up and confronted the official.

“Yes, *Monsieur le Préfet*, twelve arrests, that is your contribution.”

The pale little man bowed, and repeated the words:

“Twelve arrests. I fully understand, sir.”

He was nevertheless perplexed, worried about an aspect which he did not wish to show, though after some minutes more discussion, he decided that he would put a question. He did so, just as the Minister was dismissing him.

“Could Your Excellency perhaps indicate whom he has in mind?”

“Bah!” cried Rougon, “arrest whom you like! . . . I can’t possibly go into details. I should be swamped out. Go back to your *département* tonight, and start tomorrow. . . . Though, one word of advice—strike high. In your part you’ve got lawyers and business men and chemists who all dabble in politics. Lock ’em all up. It produces all the greater effect.”

With troubled gesture, the Prefect wiped his forehead, as he probed into his memory, to find those lawyers, businessmen and chemists, while he still went on nodding his acquiescence. But apparently Rougon found something unsatisfactory about his hesitant attitude.

“I will not conceal from you,” he said, “His Majesty at the moment is very dissatisfied with his governing apparatus. There may soon be a great re-shuffle of prefects. We need very loyal men indeed in such serious circumstances as those of the moment.”

It was like the lash of a whip.

"His Excellency can count on me," cried the Prefect. "I already have my men: there is a pharmacist at Péronne and there are a draper and paper-manufacturer at Doullens. As for the lawyers, no lack of them, there's quite an infestation of the. . . . Yes, indeed, I assure Your Excellency I shall find the dozen easily enough. . . . I am an old servant of the Empire."

He went on to speak of saving the country, and as he left he made a very low bow. When he had gone, Rougon stood swaying dubiously. He did not trust little men. Without sitting down, he took a red pencil and on a list drew a stroke through the word *Somme*. More than two-thirds of the *départements* were already so marked. In the office of the Minister of the Interior the still air was heavy with the dust gathered thick in its green plush and over and above that Rougon's stout, greasy flesh seemed to fill every corner with its own special odour.

When he next rang for Merle, it was to see with annoyance that the anteroom was still full of people. He even thought he detected those two women by the table.

"Didn't I tell you to send everybody away?" he cried. "I am going out. I can see nobody."

The editor in chief of the *Voeu National* is there," the commissioner murmured.

Rougon had quite forgotten him. Clapping his hands behind his back, he told Merle to show the man in. It was an individual in his forties, very carefully dressed, massive-featured.

"Ah, so there you are!" the Minister greeted him, uncere- moniously. "Things can't go on like this. I'm warning you!"

Tramping up and down, he showered harsh accusations against the press. The newspapers disorganized, demoralized, prompted all manner of disorders. He would rather have brigands, highwaymen, than journalists. A man can recover from a knife wound, but the stabs of the pen are poisoned. He found still more devastating comparisons, gradually working himself up, till he was in quite a rage, his voice reverberating in the room like thunder. Still standing just inside the door, the editor bowed his head to the storm, his expression humble, but horrified too. At last he put a question.

"If Your Excellency would kindly tell me exactly what it is, it would be easier to understand why. . . ."

"Why? What do you mean by why?" cried Rougon, beside himself.

He dashed across the room, savagely opened the newspaper on his desk and pointed to the columns scrawled over all in red pencil.

"There's not ten lines together that are not to be condemned. In your leading article you even seem to cast doubts on the infallibility of the régime in its work of suppression of rebellion. In this paragraph, look, *page two*, you apparently hint at myself, here where you speak of go-getters whose triumph is outrageous. In your petty items of news there are filthy stories and the most inane attacks on the upper classes.

Aghast, the editor clasped his hands and tried to get in a word.

"Upon my honour, Your Excellency. . . . I am horrified to think Your Excellency could have imagined for a moment. . . . To think this of me, when I have such a lively admiration for Your Excellency."

But Rougon was not going to listen.

"And what is worse, *Monsieur*, is that the whole world knows the links between yourself and the régime. How on earth do you think the other rags are going to respect us if the papers which we subsidize do not do so? The whole morning long I have had friends protesting about these outrageous scribbings."

Now the editor-in-chief joined in the halloo himself. These particular items he had not seen personally. But he was certainly going to sack all his sub-editors without delay. If His Excellency wished, he would send him round a proof copy every morning before publication. Relieved, Rougon declined this step, said he had not the time. He was urging the editor to the door when he suddenly remembered something.

"I was forgetting," he said. "The story you print today. . . . Your *feuilleton*—I find it loathsome. . . . You have a well brought-up woman deceiving her husband. That is a detestable argument against decent education. You cannot possibly have properly brought up women breaking their marriage vows like that!"

"The story, sir," said the editor, "has enjoyed some success." He was clearly rather worried again. "I read it myself. I must say I found it interesting."

"What? You read it yourself? Well, my dear sir, now tell me; does this wretched woman show any sign of remorse at the end?"

The editor was quite beside himself. He pressed his hand to his forehead, trying to remember if she did.

"Remorse?" he stammered. "No, I don't think she did!"

Rougon had opened the door, but he shut it again, closing the editor in.

"She *must* show remorse," he shouted. "Insist on the author's providing her with remorse!"

CHAPTER TEN

ROUGON had written to both Du Poizat and M. Kahn to spare him the weariness of an official reception on arrival at Niort. He got down on a Saturday evening, a little before seven, and drove straight to the Prefecture, with the idea of resting till midday on the Sunday. He was worn out. But after dinner a number of people came in. The news of the Minister's presence must already have been all over the town. The double door of a *salon* opening off the dining-room was opened wide and there was a little reception. Rougon was obliged to stifle his yawns. There he stood, placed between two windows, making polite responses to all and sundry telling him how delighted they were to welcome him to their little town.

A parliamentary deputy—the lawyer who had inherited M. Kahn's official candidature—was the first to appear, all spuffe and apologies, in frock coat and light-coloured trousers, explaining that he had only just come in on foot from one of his farms, but had felt it his duty to come round at once to pay his respects to His Excellency. Next came a tubby little man buttoned into a very tight-fitting black coat, complete with white gloves and a mournful ceremoniousness. This was the principal Deputy-Mayor. His maid, he said, had just brought in the news. Over and over again he repeated that the Mayor himself was going to be most put out, but he was away on his bit of land out at Varades, ten kilometres from Niort, and was not expecting His Excellency down till tomorrow. The Deputy-Mayor was followed by six more gentlemen with big feet, massive fists and broad, rough-hewn physiognomies. The Prefect introduced them as distinguished members of the Niort Statistical Society. Finally, there was the Headmaster of the Lycée, with his wife, a luscious blonde of twenty-eight, Parisian born. Her *toilettes* were revolutionizing Niort. She complained most bitterly to Rougon about provincial life.

While all this was going on, M. Kahn, who had dined with the Minister and the Prefect, was being interrogated in great detail on tomorrow's ceremony. They would have to go about

three miles out of town, to a place known as *The Mills*. Here the tunnel of the proposed Niort-Angers railway was to cut into the hillside, and His Excellency the Minister of the Interior was to fire the first blasting charge. Very moving, it was going to be. Rougon was most condescending. All he was there for, Rougon said, was to honour the industrious enterprise of an old friend. Apart from that, of course, he did consider himself, as it were, an adopted son of the *Deux-Sèvres Département*, which once upon a time had returned him as Deputy to the Legislative Assembly. In actual fact the purpose of this trip, which Du Poizat had pressed for most energetically, was to show himself to his former electors in all his power and thereby make quite sure of being elected again, should he ever need once again to get into the Legislative body.

From the windows of this little *salon* of the Prefecture they had a good view of the town, slumbering in darkness. There were now no more visitors. People must have got the news of the Minister's arrival too late. This made it a real triumph for the zealous gentlemen who were actually present. No hint of their retiring. They were swollen with pride at being the first to possess His Excellency in a select party. Once again, louder than before, in a voice just not lugubrious enough to conceal his immense delight, the Deputy-Mayor cried:

"Heavens! But the Mayor is certainly going to be most mortified! So are the Chief Magistrate, and the Imperial Public Prosecutor! And all the rest of our notables."

Nevertheless, about nine o'clock one might well have thought that the whole town was suddenly clumping into the hall of the Prefecture, for there was a most impressive tramping of heavy feet, after which a servant appeared to say that the Central Police Superintendent was there, and would like to present his respects to His Excellency. And it was Gilquin who now appeared, a superb Gilquin, a Gilquin in black frock coat, his hands gloved with yellow gloves and his feet booted in soft glacé kid button boots. Du Poizat had taken Gilquin on to his staff. It was a most respectable Gilquin too, the only trace of the former man being a rather vulgar swagger of the shoulders which lingered and the same old mania for never parting from his hat—he kept it now poised on one hip, standing slightly tipped back himself, in the studied pose of a tailor's fashion plate. With exaggerated humility he bowed to Rougon and said:

"May I solicit His Excellency's kind recollection of myself? I have had the honour of meeting him on a number of occasions in Paris."

Rougon grinned and chatted for a moment with him, after which Gilquin made a beeline for the dining-room, where tea had just been poured out. Here at a corner of the table he found M. Kahn running through the list of invitations for the next day's ceremony. Meanwhile, in the little *salon*, talk turned to the greatness of the régime. Standing at Rougon's side, Du Poizat sang the praises of the Second Empire, and after this the two men exchanged bows, as if congratulating each other on a lovely piece of work of a personal nature, while the Niortians gaped with admiration full of respect.

"Aren't those fine bucks grand!" murmured Gilquin, following the scene from the wide-open dining-room door.

Pouring a good tot of rum into his tea, he gave M. Kahn a nudge. Thin and fevered, those white teeth of his all higgledy-piggledy in his infantile face, now all hectic with his triumph, Du Poizat really did make Gilquin laugh. Yes, Du Poizat "came off" really well.

"Did you see him when he first came down here?" Gilquin went on, in a whisper. "I did. I was with him. Didn't he just fling his weight about! He must have had a fine old score to settle with these folk down here. Ever since he's been Prefect he's been taking it out on them for what he suffered as a young man. There isn't one of the local bigwigs, I can tell you, who knew him in the old days, when he was only a poor bastard, who feels at all like smiling now when he comes their way. . . . Ahah! He's a tough Prefect, he is, if ever there was one, his whole heart's in it! Not a bit like that fellow Langlade he replaced. A regular ladies' man he was! Why, we turned up photographs of very scantily dressed dames even in the office files, we did!"

Then Gilquin was suddenly silent for a moment. He had suddenly got the impression that the Lycée headmaster's wife was watching him. To show to advantage what a fine figure he was cutting, he at once set to work to apostrophize M. Kahn again:

"Have you heard the story of Du Poizat's meeting with his father? One of the funniest things that ever happened, I assure you. . . . As you know, the old boy is a former usher, who got a bit of money together by running a short-term

money-lender's business, and now lives like a regular hermit, in an old tumble-down house, with loaded guns ready in the hall. . . . Well, a score of times the old man has said his son would come to a bad end, and Du Poizat has been dreaming for some time of getting the best of his father. That was more than half the reason why he so wanted to be Prefect here. . . . Well, one morning, Du Poizat puts on his finest uniform and makes a tour of inspection of the district the excuse to knock at his old man's door. For quite quarter of an hour father and son argued away, before at last the old boy opened up to him. And there we saw a pale little old man staring blankly at all that gold braid on the uniform: And do you know what he said, as soon as the son had managed to explain that he was now the Prefect? *'Very well, Leopold my boy, then will you please stop the tax collector in future coming round here bothering me!'* And not a hint of being astonished that Du Poizat was Prefect. . . . When Du Poizat had recovered from the shock, he was as white as a sheet, staring at his father with tight lips. The old man's calm was simply maddening. Du Poizat saw that there was one man in his *Département* whom he would never best."

M. Kahn gave an almost imperceptible nod. He had put the list of invitations back into his pocket. With frequent glances at the other room, he now sipped at his tea.

"Rougon's dead tired," he said suddenly. "These fools had far better let him go to bed. He really needs a good rest before tomorrow's ceremony."

"I had not seen him since he got back into office," Gilquin said. "He has put on flesh." Then, lowering his voice still further, he said: "Tough crowd, these fine fellows are, you know. . . . When you think what they schemed up, when the big attempt came off. . . . I had given them the word, you know, about what was hatching. And when tomorrow came, what d'y'think, everything went off as per plan, just as if I never warned them. Rougon makes out he reported about the assassins to the police. But nobody is going to swallow that one. But that's all his affair. No need to talk about it. . . . On that day the old bastard and Du Poizat gave me a slap-up lunch in a restaurant on the big boulevards. Phew! What a do that was! We were to have gone to the theatre that evening. But it's all a blank to me. I slept the clock round twice."

M. Kahn must have found Gilquin's confidences quite disturbing. He vanished from the dining-room. Left alone,

Gilquin now came to the definite conclusion that the wife of the Lycée headmaster was indeed eyeing him, so he made his way back into the *salon* and approached her, finally bringing her tea and biscuits and cakes. He certainly was a fine figure of a man, a badly-brought up bounder most correctly dressed, and this combination gradually seemed to gain the interest of the Parisian-born country-town wife. The deputy, meanwhile, had been arguing the case for a new church at Niort, while the Deputy-Mayor wanted a bridge and the headmaster talked of extensions to his school and with nodding heads the six members of the Statistical Society approved all propositions.

"Well, gentlemen," replied Rougon, his eyes half closed, "we must see about all that later. I am here to hear what you want, and to see that your requests get a hearing."

The clock was striking ten, when a servant entered to whisper to the Prefect, the Prefect immediately whispered in the Minister's ear, and Rougon hurried out of the room. It was Mme. Correur, in the adjoining room, to see him. With her she had a tall, very thin girl with a blotchy complexion.

"Good gracious! You are here, are you?" cried Rougon.

"I have only just run down," said Mme. Correur. "We have put up at the *Hôtel de Paris*, opposite."

She explained that she had been to Coulonges. She had spent a couple of days there. She broke off to introduce the tall girl.

"Mademoiselle Herminie Billecoq was so kind as to come with me," she said.

Herminie Billecoq bowed most respectfully.

Mme. Correur continued:

"I did not mention the idea of coming down to you because you might have scolded me. But it was more than I could do not to come. I just had to see my brother. And when I heard you were here, I came round at once. As a matter of fact, we were watching when you came. We saw you come into the Prefecture, only we thought we had better not come to see you till later. These small towns are so spiteful."

Rougon nodded. There was no doubt about it, plump, pink powdered little Mme. Correur in a bright yellow gown did look most compromising in a country town.

"And did you see your brother?" he enquired.

"Ah, yes," she ground out, "yes, I did see him. Mme.

Martineau did not dare keep me out. She had just taken a shovel, to caramelize some sugar. . . . Oh, my poor brother! I knew he was ailing, but it was really heart-breaking to see him looking so poorly. But he promised he would not disinherit me. That would be contrary to his principles, he said. The will has been drawn up and whatever he leaves is to be divided between me and Mme. Martineau. . . . Isn't it, Herminie?"

"Yes, whatever he leaves is to be shared," the tall girl confirmed. "He said so when you came in and he said it again when he saw you out. No, there's no question of it, I heard it."

By now Rougon was edging the two women out.

"Well, now I really am delighted," he said. "Your mind is at rest now, isn't it? Good gracious, family quarrels of course do always work out all right in the end. . . . Well, goodnight to you both. Time I was getting to bed."

But Mme. Correur stopped him. She had drawn her handkerchief from her pocket and was dabbing at her eyes. A sudden access of anxiety had seized her.

"But poor Martineau!" she whimpered. "He was so kind, he forgave me without any fuss. . . . If you only knew, my dear friend. . . . It was for his sake I came round now, to see you, I wanted to beg you to do something for him. . . ."

Tears choked her voice. She began to sob bitterly. In utter astonishment, Rougon stared, unable to comprehend what it was all about. Mme. Herminie Billecoq was also crying now, though not quite so demonstratively. She was a very sensitive personality. To her, tears were contagious. And she was the first to stammer an explanation:

"M. Martineau has got mixed up in politics," she said.

It was the signal for Mme. Correur to begin, with great volubility:

"Do you remember?" she asked. "I told you how worried about it I was, some time ago. I had a presentiment. . . . Martineau was drifting towards the republicans. At the last elections, it seems he got quite carried away and canvassed fiercely for the opposition candidate. I knew details then which I did not want to tell you. It was clear it was all going to lead him into real trouble. . . . As soon as I got to Coulonges and had put up at the *Lion d'Or* I asked people and I learned a great deal more. My brother has committed every possible folly. Nobody locally would be at all surprised if he was taken

into custody now. They are expecting to see the gendarmerie cart him off any day. . . . You may imagine what a blow that has been to me. I thought of you at once, my dear friend."

Once again her voice was stifled by choking sobs. Rougon tried to set her mind at ease. He would have a word with Du Poizat, he said. He would put a stop to the prosecution, if anything had been begun. He even went so far as to say:

"I am the boss, you can go to bed with an easy mind."

All the tears now dried away, Mme. Correur folded her handkerchief and tossed back her head. Then, in an undertone, she began again.

"No, the fact is, you don't know all. It is much more serious than you think. . . . He takes Mme. Martineau to mass, but he himself stays outside. He says he's never going to set foot in any of your churches. It's the scandal of the whole district. He's in tow with a man who used to be a lawyer in the district, a man of 1848. They spend hours together, those two, planning fearful things. Dubious characters have often been seen slipping through my brother's garden by night, no doubt to get instructions."

At every new detail, Rougon merely shrugged his shoulders till, unable to bear his excessive impassivity any longer, Mlle. Herminie Billecoq suddenly cried:

"And he's getting letters from all over the world, letters with red seals; we had it straight from the postman. The man was quite unwilling to talk about it. He went white as a sheet when we enquired. We had to give him a couple of francs to get him to talk. . . . Then there's the journey M. Martineau made recently, only a month since. He was away a whole week, and nobody in the district to this day can find out where he went. The landlady of the *Lion d'Or* assures us that he did not even take a suit-case with him."

"Herminie, will you be quiet, please!" cried Mme. Correur, anxiously. "My poor brother's really in a very difficult position. It is not for us to make it worse."

Peering from one woman to the other, Rougon had now begun at last to prick up his ears. He had grown rather serious.

"If he has got himself as deep in the mire as that . . ." he murmured. He thought he caught a flicker of light in Mme. Correur's worried eyes. He went on:

"Of course, I shall do all I can, but I can make no promises."

"Oh dear, oh dear, he's a lost man!" lamented Mme. Correur. "He's a lost man, I tell you frankly, I can feel it. . . . We would rather say nothing. But, if you knew all we know. . . ."

She broke off sharply and bit at her handkerchief.

"And when I think," she began again, "I had not seen him for twenty long years, and now we've come together again, I may never see him any more. . . . He was so kind, so kind."

Herminie shrugged her shoulders, very faintly, and by signs tried to intimate to Rougon that though the old lawyer was really an old rascal, he should make allowances for the grief of the man's own sister.

"If I were you," she said to Mme. Correur, "I would tell His Excellency everything. That would be far better."

At this Mme. Correur seemed to brace herself for the great effort. Lowering her voice still further, she said:

"Do you remember the services of thanksgiving in all the churches, when our dear Emperor had that miraculous escape at the *Opera House*? Well, when they had a special *Te Deum* at Coulonges, a man who lived near him asked my brother if he was not going to put in an appearance too, and the wretched man replied: '*And what would I have to do in your church? A damn lot I care about the Emperor!*'"

"'*A damn lot I care about the Emperor!*'" breathed Mlle Herminie Billecoq, in horror.

"Now perhaps you can understand why I'm so worried," continued the former hotel keeper. "As I said before, nobody about here would be at all surprised if my brother was arrested."

As she uttered these words, her gaze held Rougon's firmly, but he made no immediate response. He seemed to be making a last final effort to get the truth out of that puffy countenance, with the colourless eyes blinking uneasily under their sparse straw-coloured eyelashes. For a moment his glance rested on the podgy white throat. Then, with a hopeless gesture, he said:

"I can do nothing. I assure you. It is beyond my powers."

He gave reasons. He made a point, he alleged, of never interfering personally in such cases. If the law had been infringed, matters must take their course. He wished he had not known Mme. Correur personally, he said. Their personal friendship really tied his hands. Of course, he would find out

how matters stood. With this assurance to her, he even began to condole with Mme. Correur, almost as if her brother was already *en route* to some oversea penal outpost.

Mme. Correur let her head sink on her bosom. The ponderous pile of flaxen hair rolled high on her nape shook with feeble heavings as she sobbed. Nevertheless, bit by bit, she did grow calmer and at last was on the point of going, when, suddenly, she thrust Herminie to the fore.

"Mlle. Herminie Billecoq," she cried, "I did introduce her, didn't I? This is the young lady we succeeded in getting that marriage grant for. The officer in question—her seducer, that is—has still not been able to marry her. Endless formalities, you know, have hindered it. . . . My dear, you ought to thank His Excellency!"

Blushing, the tall girl did so, with an air of shocked innocence, rather as if somebody had uttered a "naughty" word in front of her. Mme. Correur let her lead the way, then, shaking Rougon's hand very firmly, she murmured:

"Eugène, I count on you!"

When the Minister of the Interior returned to the reception, it was to find the room empty. Du Poizat had contrived to get rid of the member of the Legislature, the Deputy-Mayor, and the half-dozen members of the statistical society. M. Kahn too had left, after arranging to meet His Excellency the following day at ten o'clock. In the dining-room now remained only the Headmaster of the Lycée's wife and Gilquin. These two were busily nibbling at buns and talking of Paris. Gilquin was making eyes at the young blonde while he talked on about Longchamps races, the latest pictures at the *Salon*, a *Comédie Française* first night, all with the easy-going familiarity of one familiar with life at all levels. While this was in progress, the Headmaster himself was *sotto voce* feeding the Prefect with information concerning a certain fourth-form master suspected of republicanism. It was eleven o'clock. The company now at last prepared to take their leave of His Excellency. Gilquin was proposing to leave together with the Headmaster and his wife—indeed, he had just offered the lady his arm—when Rougon called him back.

"Superintendent," he said, formally, "can I have a word with you before you go, please?"

As no other visitors were left, Rougon now addressed both Police Superintendent and Prefect together.

"What's this Martineau case all about?" he asked. "Has this lawyer fellow really got involved?"

Gilquin smirked, while Du Poizat furnished a few details.

"Heavens!" he said, "it hadn't struck me there was anything serious. True, I have had denunciations—anonymous letters about him, you know. . . . No doubt he does dabble a little in politics. But we've already made four arrests, you see, in the *département*. To make up the full five you've allotted us, I myself would have preferred to put away a fourth-form schoolmaster who reads his pupils revolutionary literature."

"Well, some very grave facts have come to my notice," said Rougon, sternly. "I think this man Martineau really is dangerous. All his sister's tears are not going to save him. The public welfare is at stake."

He swung round and confronted Gilquin.

"What's your opinion?" he demanded.

"I shall arrange for arrest tomorrow," came the firm reply. "I know the whole case. I saw Mme. Correur at the *Hôtel de Paris*, where I usually dine."

Du Poizat made no objection. Drawing a tiny notebook from his pocket, he crossed out one name, to write another above it, though he also suggested that the Superintendent would do well to have a sharp watch kept on that schoolmaster.

Rougon went to the door with Gilquin. "This man Martineau's not in good health," he said. "Go to Coulonges yourself. Handle him very gently."

Gilquin was quite offended by this. Drawing himself up very erect, and forgetting all considerations of respect, he was most frank with the Minister.

"What d'y'take me for?" he demanded. "Think I'm an ordinary dirty cop? You ask Du Poizat about that chemist I arrested in bed the day before yesterday. Between the sheets with him he had a certain usher's missus, but not a word got out. . . . Oh no, I always act as a man of the world should."

Rougon slept soundly for nine hours. When he opened his eyes the following morning, towards half-past eight, he sent for Du Poizat. Du Poizat entered, very cheerful, a cigar between his lips. The two men chatted and joked as if the old days, when they lodged with Mme. Mélanie and used to wake each other up with slaps on the bare behind. While he washed and dressed, Rougon asked for all sorts of details about local affairs, potted biographies of officials, what this man wanted,

what that one's little weakness was. He wanted to be able to say the right thing about each one.

"Don't you worry, I'll tip you off," said Du Poizat, with a laugh.

And in a few words he put him in the picture, so that he knew all about the men he would have to deal with. Every now and then Rougon had him repeat some detail, so that he might memorize it better. At ten o'clock, M. Kahn arrived, and the three of them lunched together, fixing the final details of the ceremony. The Prefect would make a speech, M. Kahn too, Rougon to follow after. But they thought there ought to be a fourth speech. For a moment, they considered the Mayor, but Du Poizat decided the man was too big a fool, and he advised the selection of the Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges, who for that matter would seem to be indicated professionally. M. Kahn, however, was inclined to think the man was too hypercritical. Finally, when they rose from table, M. Kahn took Rougon aside and indicated the points he would like him to underline in his speech.

They were to assemble at half-past ten, at the Prefecture. The Mayor and the first Deputy-Mayor came together. The Mayor stammered his apologies. He was most upset at having been out of town the day before, while the Deputy demonstratively enquired of His Excellency whether he had had a good night and felt thoroughly rested after that tiring evening. These were followed by the President of the civil court, the public prosecutor and his two assistants, the Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges, after whom came the Tax Collector and the Registrar of Mortgages. Some of these gentlemen had their ladies with them. The wife of the Headmaster of the Lycée caused quite a commotion. Dressed in a most striking sky-blue gown, she begged His Excellency to excuse her husband, he was detained at the Lycée by an attack of gout which had come on last night, after his return home. Meanwhile, other personalities were arriving: the Colonel of the 78th Line Regiment, quartered at Niort, the President of the Commercial Court, the two Magistrates of the town, the Warden of Forests and Waters, with his three daughters, some Municipal Councillors, delegates of the Consultative Chamber of Arts and Manufactures, of the Statistical Society and of the Industrial Conciliation Board.

The reception took place in the main reception room of the

Prefecture. Du Poizat presented them, while, smiling and bowing, the Minister greeted each one as if he were an old acquaintance. He proved to know astonishing little details about every man. He had words of warm approval for the speech which the Public Prosecutor had recently made *à propos* of a case of adultery, from the Tax Collector he demanded news of *madame's* health, showing that he was well aware that she had been bedridden for the past two months; he kept the Colonel of the 78th some moments, while he made it clear that he was not ignorant of the brilliant studies the Colonel's son had made at St. Cyr; with the Municipal Councillor, who owned a big shoemaking establishment, he talked footwear, while with the Mortgage Registrar, who was an enthusiastic antiquarian, he embarked on a great discussion of the Druidic megalith discovered only last week. If he ever hesitated, seeking a phrase, Du Poizat was at hand to prompt him skilfully, though in fact Rougon was never quite at a loss.

For instance, when the President of the Commercial Court entered the room and bowed, Rougon cried affably:

"You are alone, *Monsieur le Président*? I do hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing *Madame* at the banquet, this evening. . . ." Then, faced with a milling crowd of faces, he paused for a moment, while Du Poizat nudged him gently and he remembered—the president of that particular court was separated from his wife. He had dropped a brick. There had been quite a scandal. He had thought he was addressing the man's opposite number at the civil court. But that did not in the least put him off his stride. The smile did not leave his features. He made no attempt to correct his error, but with great subtlety hastened to say:

"Yes, *Monsieur le Président*, I bring you good news. My colleague, the Great Seal, tells me he has put your name forward for a little bit of ribbon. Of course this is very indiscreet of me. You mustn't talk about it yet."

The President of the Bench flushed to the tips of his ears. He was so delighted, that he could not get a word out. Fellow citizens were pressing round him with congratulations, while Rougon made a mental note of this decoration which he had conferred in such timely fashion. He must not fail to tip off the Great Seal. He felt the cuckolded husband rather deserved a decoration. Du Poizat smiled proudly at this skill.

By now there were some fifty persons in the big reception

room. All were on the *qui vive* with expectation, not a word spoken, all eyes uneasy.

"Well, time's getting on, perhaps we might start out," said the Minister.

But the Prefect bent to his ear and explained that the Deputy for the *Département*—M. Kahn's old adversary—had not yet arrived. Then in he too came, perspiring profusely. He simply could not make out what had happened. His watch must have stopped and started again, extraordinary, then, anxious to remind everybody within earshot that he had been in the party last night, he resumed his speech with the gambit: "As I was remarking last night to Your Excellency . . ." and insisted on walking by Rougon's side, to tell him that he was returning to Paris tomorrow morning. True, the Easter recess had ended on the Tuesday, and the house had already reassembled, but he had thought it only right to stay on at Niort the few days more, to show His Excellency the Minister the honours of his *Département*.

By now the company of invited personages were all down in the Prefecture courtyard, where a dozen carriages were awaiting them on either side of the steps. Together with the Deputy, the Prefect and the Mayor, Rougon took his place in the leading calash. The remainder of the guests to the best of their ability piled in order of rank into the remaining vehicles—two more calashes, three victorias and some waggonettes with from six to eight seats each. Off they went. the horses trotting smartly, the ladies' ribbons flying, petticoats protruding over the doors, and the men's silk hats flashing in the sunlight. They had to negotiate a good portion of Niort. In the narrow streets the harsh cobbles jolted terribly, with a tremendous grinding of iron on stone, but Niort folk waved from every door and every window, craning to get a glimpse of the great man, and quite astonished to see his very middle-class frock coat beside the gilt-befrogged uniform of the Prefect.

Once outside the town, they bowled along a broad road bordered with fine trees. It was very mild, a lovely April day, the sky limpid and all aglow with sunlight. The smooth, straight road plunged into the country between gardens full of flowering lilac and apricots, then widened out on either side, with big stretches of arable intersected by clumps of trees. And they talked.

"That's a spinning mill, isn't it?" Rougon enquired of the Prefect, who had been murmuring something into his ear. He turned to the Mayor and pointed to the red-brick building they could see on the river bank. "That's your mill, am I not right?" he said. "I've heard something about your new system of wool-carding. I must try to find a moment to go and see all these most interesting things."

He now asked questions about the available hydro-power of the river, saying that given the right conditions water power was most advantageous. He astonished the Mayor by his technical knowledge. The other carriages followed at irregular intervals. The dull thud of the horses' hoofs was now intermingled with talk much larded with figures. Suddenly, a ripple of clear laughter came from behind them. It was the Headmaster's wife. Her sunshade had just been blown right out of her hand, to land on a stone-heap.

"You have a farm out here, have you not?" Rougon turned to the Deputy, with a smile. "If I'm not mistaken, that must be it, away up that slope. . . . What marvellous grazing! Of course, I know your interest in stock-raising. At the recent show some of your cows took medals, did they not?"

So now they talked livestock. Drenched with sunlight, the meadows were of soft green velvet. A dense carpet of flowers was springing up. Curtains of tall poplars, together with vistas of skyline, framed delicious views. An old woman leading a donkey had to halt the animal by the roadside to let the procession go by, and the donkey was so scared by this cavalcade of vehicles with their vast expanses of varnish, flicking their reflections over the countryside, that it began to bray. But the dressed-up ladies and begloved gentlemen saw no reason to abandon their gravity.

Bearing left, they mounted a gentle slope, then plunged down again—and there they were! It was a cup in the hills, the blind end of a narrow valley, a sort of burrow sealed off between three hills which walled it in. Looking up, all one saw of the surrounding country was the ruined frames of two old windmills silhouetted black on the skyline. At the head of this hollow, in the centre of a level patch of greensward, a marquee had been erected, the grey canvas picked out by a broad strip of red and bunched flags on each of the four faces. About a thousand sightseers had come out on foot, including Niortians, men and women, and countryfolk from nearby.

These were all ranged on the shady side, round the natural amphitheatre formed by one of the hills. In front of the marquee was a detachment of the 78th Regiment, with side arms, and opposite them the Niort Fire Brigade, the spick and spanness of all of whom was duly noted. At the edge of the greensward a team of workmen, in brand-new blue tunics, was in readiness, together with the engineers, all stiffly buttoned into black frock coats. As soon as the carriages appeared in sight, the Philharmonic Society of Niort, all amateurs, struck up the overture to the *Dame Blanche*.

"Cheers for His Excellency, hip-hip-hurray!" cried a number of voices, but the din of the instrumentalists blotted them out.

Rougon got down. He cast one glance round the hole in which he found himself. This enclosing horizon irritated him. It somehow seemed to diminish the grandeur of the moment. He stood where he was for some moments, in expectation of a welcoming speech. At last, there was M. Kahn, scurrying forward. He had slipped away from the Prefecture immediately after lunch, but he had thought it right, as a safeguard, to inspect the charge which His Excellency was to ignite. He it was conducted the Minister to the marquee. For some moments, there was something of a muddle. Rougon wanted certain information.

"Well, is this the cutting which is to lead into the tunnel?"

"Yes, certainly," replied M. Kahn. "This is the place. The first charge has been inserted in that red-coloured mass of rock, just where Your Excellency can see a flag."

The slope at the head of the valley had been excavated by hand, to lay bare the underlying rock. Uprooted brushwood hung loose in the debris. The floor of the cutting was covered with leaves. Cutting through paths, patches of grass and thickets, as M. Kahn pointed out, was the route the railway was to take, indicated now by a double line of surveyors' poles with scraps of white paper strung between them, a peaceful corner of nature about to be rooted up.

By now the dignitaries had succeeded in crowding into the marquee. Those at the tail of the procession peered through gaps. The Philharmonic Society brought its overture to a close.

Suddenly a strident voice pulsated through the silence:

"*Monsieur le Ministre*," it said, "may I be the first to thank Your Excellency for his gracious acceptance of the invitation

we made so bold as to address to you. The *Deux-Sèvres Département* will now ever retain the memory. . . .”

It was Du Poizat, leading off. He was only three paces from Rougon. There they both stood, and at certain cadences of the speech bowed slightly one to the other. Du Poizat went on in this strain for quarter of an hour, calling to mind the dazzling manner in which M. Rougon had once stood for the *département* in the Legislative Assembly. The city of Niort had inscribed his name in its annals as one of its benefactors. It was burning on every possible occasion to give him token of its gratitude. Du Poizat had undertaken the political as well as the practical aspect of the ceremony. There were moments when his voice faded away altogether in the open air and all that remained were his gestures, mainly a regular pumping of the right arm. The eyes of the thousand-odd sightseers ranged up the slope were caught by the embroidery of his coat-sleeve, the gilt of it gleaming as the sun caught it.

Next, M. Kahn took his position in the centre of the marquee. He, however, had a very big voice. Some words he simply bawled. The dead end of the valley formed an echoing wall, sending the final words of every sentence, drawled out with a trifle too much satisfaction, reverberating back. M. Kahn spoke of his long efforts, his research, and all the official negotiations he had been obliged to maintain for nearly four years, to be able to endow his fatherland with a new railway. Now prosperity of every sort was going to rain down on this *Département*. The fields would be fertilized, the factories would redouble their production, commerce would begin to throb in the heart of the humblest hamlet. Indeed, to listen to him, it appeared that the *Deux-Sèvres département* would be transformed by his hands, now they were freed, into a veritable land of cockaigne, the rivers flowing with milk and every thicket a magic one, sheltering tables which would groan with good things for all and sundry to come and partake of. Then, all at once, he assumed excessive modesty. Nobody owed him any gratitude for this. Without the eminent patronage of which he was proud, he could never have brought so tremendous a scheme to fruition. Turning now towards Rougon, he apostrophized him as “the illustrious Minister who is the defender of every noble and beneficent concept.” To conclude, he spoke enthusiastically of the financial benefits of this enterprise. There had been a scramble for shares in it

on the Stock Exchange. Happy the investor able to put his money into an undertaking to which His Excellency the Minister of the Interior deigned to subscribe his name!

"Hear, hear!" murmured a number of the guests.

The Mayor and several representatives of the régime now shook M. Kahn's hand, and he evinced profound emotion. There was a burst of applause outside. The Philharmonic Society thought this the right moment for a quick march, but the Deputy-Mayor at once rushed a member of the Fire Brigade to silence the band, while, inside the tent, the Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges hesitated, declaring that he had not prepared any speech, till the Prefect's insistence persuaded him to speak, with M. Kahn getting very worried and whispering into the Prefect's ear: "I assure you, it's a mistake! The man is as spiteful as a shrew."

The Chief Engineer was tall and thin, and his *forte* was irony. He spoke slowly, with a sideways twist of his mouth whenever he was preparing to emit one of his epigrams. He began by overwhelming M. Kahn with words of praise. Then came the first malicious hints. With all the scorn of your government engineer for his opposite number in private practice, he proceeded to give a brief assessment of M. Kahn's railway project. He recalled the counter-scheme of the *Western Company*. This would have run through Thouars, not Niort. Without revealing any definite malice, he drew everybody's attention to the pronounced elbow which M. Kahn's route was going to introduce in the line. It would, he pointed out, incidentally serve the Bressuire iron foundry. This was all done without a hint of crudity, one pin-prick after another, which only those in the know might appreciate, all interlarded throughout with pleasant phrases. But he wound up on a more ferocious note. He seemed to have regrets—regrets that the "illustrious minister" should have come down and compromised his good name regarding a project the financial aspect of which was really rather worrying to all men of experience. Enormous capital outlay would be required and this called for the greatest honesty and disinterestedness. Then, twisting his lips awry, he uttered his final phrase:

"Such worries of course are chimerical and everybody's mind is quite at rest, seeing the enterprise headed by a man whose financial soundness and high commercial probity are so well known in the *Département*."

A murmur of approval ran through the assembly. But a few of those present did glance at M. Kahn. M. Kahn was doing his best to smile, but his lips were bloodless. Rougon had half-closed his eyes at this final point, as he seemed to find the light dazzling. When he opened them again there was a sombre glint in them. His original intention had been to make only a short speech. But now he had one of his band to defend. He took three steps forward, to the front of the tent and then, with a vast gesture which seemed to draw the whole of an attentive fatherland into his audience, he began:

"Gentlemen," he said, "let me endeavour to cross these hills in thought. I would like to take a quick glance at our Empire as a whole, and so enlarge the occasion which has brought together here and transform it into a fête of all who are engaged in commerce and industry. At this very instant, throughout France, from north to south, men are busy, cutting canals, building railways, piercing mountain ranges, throwing bridges. . . ."

He had already established a deathly silence. Between the phrases one could hear the breeze in the tree-tops and the high note of a sluice working, afar off. Though out to rival the soldiers, out under the hot sun, the rigour of their bearing, the fire brigade now began to cast sidelong glances, to see if they could get a glimpse of the Minister talking, without actually turning their heads. On the hillside the spectators had now all settled down comfortably. The ladies had spread out handkerchiefs and were squatting on them, and two gentlemen on the edge of the crowd, where the sun was now reaching, had just opened up their wives' sunshades. Meanwhile, Rougon's voice gradually grew in volume. Sunk in this hollow, he seemed frustrated, as if the valley was too confining for his gestures. Thrusting his hands out before him all at once, he seemed to make an effort to roll the very horizon back. Twice he thus sought room to talk. But away there on the skyline all he found was—two gutted windmills blistering in the sunshine.

His oration took up M. Kahn's theme again and enlarged on it. Now it was not merely the *Département des Deux Sèvres* which was entering on an era of miraculous prosperity, but the whole of France—and all this thanks to the linking of Niort to Angers by a branch line. For ten minutes on end he enumerated the countless benefits which would shower down on France's millions. He even involved the hand of the

Almighty. Then came his rejoinder to the remarks of the Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges. Not that he argued about what that person had said. He did not even allude to it. He merely said exactly the contrary. He insisted on M. Kahn's devotion to the public weal. He showed M. Kahn to be a man of great modesty, a character disinterested by nature, a man cut on the grand scale. The financial aspect of the undertaking was most reassuring to him. With a smile on his lips he made a rapid gesture which piled up mountains of gold. And at that point the applause was so vociferous that he had to break off.

"Gentlemen, one last word," he said, after wiping his lips with his handkerchief.

This "last word" lasted quarter of an hour. He got carried away and put more into it than he had really intended. In his peroration, when he came to the greatness of the reign, and praised the lofty wisdom of the Emperor, he went so far as to intimate that His Majesty took a particular interest in this *Niort to Angers* branch line. The undertaking was becoming a State concern.

Three great waves of applause followed. A flock of rooks at their evolutions in the pure sky signalled their alarm with prolonged croaking. At the final phrase of the speech, a signal given from the marquee set the Philharmonic Society going, and the ladies drew their skirts tight about their ankles and rose to their feet, anxious to miss nothing of the spectacle. Meanwhile, Rougon was surrounded by beaming members of the gathering of special invitees. The Deputy expressed his wonder at the speech in an undertone which the Minister was sure to overhear and the Mayor, the Public Prosecutor and the Colonel of the 78th Regiment all nodded their assent. The most enthusiastic person, however, now proved to be none other than the Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges. Apparently thunder-struck by the great man's rhetoric, his lips twisted to one side, he evinced a sycophancy which was quite remarkable.

"If Your Excellency would kindly come with me," said M. Kahn, his massive features covered with a radiant perspiration.

This was the culminating point. His Excellency was about to fire the first charge. Orders had just been given to the team of workers in new tunics. Followed by M. Kahn and the Minister, the men entered the trench first, and ranged themselves at the far end in two rows a double row chain. A foreman

held out a length of ignited taper and presented this to Rougon. The dignitaries, who had remained in the marquee, peered out. The expectant onlookers waited. The Philharmonic Society kept up with its musical effort.

"Will it make a lot of noise?" enquired the wife of the Headmaster, with an anxious smile, of one of the two Deputy-Mayors.

"It all depends on the nature of the rock," the President of the Commercial Court hastened to reply. He went into mineralogical details.

"Well, I don't mind what anybody says, I'm going to put my fingers in my ears," declared the eldest of the three daughters of the Warden of Forests and Waters.

Standing there with that lighted taper in his hand in the midst of this gathering, Rougon felt rather silly. Higher up the slope the skeletons of those windmills seemed to groan more loudly in the wind. Then, swiftly, he lit the fuse set between two stones which the foreman indicated. Immediately, a workman blew a long blast on a horn. The whole team withdrew. With uneasy caution, M. Kahn quickly led His Excellency back inside the marquee.

"Well, it's a very long time going off, isn't it?" muttered the Registrar of Mortgages, blinking anxiously, and prey to a maddening desire to stuff up his ears like the ladies.

The explosion did not occur till two minutes later. From over-caution, they had made the fuse far too long. The expectation of the onlookers had become agonizing. All eyes, fastened on that rock, seemed to see it heave. There were highly strung people who said they felt their hearts would burst. But at last there did come a dull rumble, the rock split, and a fountain of debris, with lumps as large as a man's two fists, rose high into the air in a cloud of smoke, and everybody drew back. A hundred times, all round, you could hear people saying: "Could you smell the dynamite?"

That evening the Prefect gave a banquet to which the public officials were invited. He had issued five hundred invitations to the dance which followed. It was a magnificent ball, in fact. The big reception-room was gay with greenery, and in the corners were added four additional chandeliers which, together with that in the centre, produced an astonishing illumination. Niort did not know when it had seen such brilliance. The glare from the six windows lighted the whole

square and there were more than two thousand people gathered outside to stare up and try to catch a glimpse of the dancers. Even the orchestra was so clearly to be heard that young ragamuffins actually organized their own cake-trots on the pavements. By nine o'clock the ladies' fans were quite busy, refreshments were going round, and quadrilles had taken the place of waltzes and polkas. Stationed by the door, Du Poizat most ceremoniously received late arrivals with a gracious smile.

"But are you not dancing at all, Your Excellency?" boldly enquired the Lycée Headmaster's wife of Rougon. She had just come in, dressed in a frock of muslin covered with golden stars.

With a smile, Rougon made his excuses. He was standing near a window, surrounded by a handful of people, discussing a revision of the cadastral survey, while he kept glancing swiftly outside. On the other side of the square, in the garish light with which the chandeliers lighted up the fronts of the houses opposite, he had just perceived Mme. Correur and Mlle. Herminie Billecoq at one of the windows of the *Hôtel de Paris*. They were stationed there, leaning on the cross-bar, as if it were the front edge of a private box, watching the celebrations. Their countenances were shining, their throats and shoulders bare, and there were moments when the heated gaiety of the ballroom surged up more luxuriously than usual when he could see their bosoms swell with gentle laughter.

Meanwhile, the wife of the Lycée Headmaster was completing her round of the ballroom. She was indifferent to the admiration which the amplitude of her long skirts seemed to arouse in the young men. She was looking for somebody. There was a permanent, languishing smile on her lips.

"I don't seem to see the Superintendent of Police," she remarked, at last, to Du Poizat, when that person enquired after the health of her husband. "I promised him a waltz."

"Well, he ought to be here," replied the Prefect, "I am surprised not to see him. . . . Certainly, he had a job on this afternoon, but he promised to be back at six."

It was towards midday, after lunching, that Gilquin had left Niort on horseback, to go out and arrest lawyer Martineau. Coulonges was some fourteen miles out. He reckoned to be there at two o'clock and to be able to start back at the latest by four, so he would not miss the banquet, to which he was

invited. So he did not press his horse much, but proceeded at a jog-trot, telling himself that he was going to be most enterprising this evening at the ball with that fair piece; the only drawback was that to his taste she was a trifle on the thin side. Gilquin liked his women plump. At Coulonges, he stabled his nag at the *Lion d'Or*, where a gendarmery corporal with two men were to be ready for him. In this way, his arrival would not be noticed, they would take a cab, and quickly "pack" their lawyer aboard, without one of the neighbouring ladies even coming to the door. But the gendarmes were not there. Gilquin waited for them till five o'clock, swearing all the time, every now and then taking a little nip of liquor, with a glance at his watch every quarter-of-an-hour. He would never get back to Niort in time for dinner. And he had given orders for his horse to be saddled to go away, when at last, there was the corporal with his men. There had been a misunderstanding.

"All right then, no explanations, we've no time for that," cried the Chief Superintendent, angrily. "It's quarter past five already. . . . Let's nab our man, and we must get a move on too. We must be on the way inside ten minutes."

Normally, Gilquin was a kindly individual. In his work he prided himself on perfect urbanity. On this particular occasion he had even evolved a complicated plan to spare Mme. Correux's brother any great upset. According to this, he was to go inside by himself, while the gendarmes stayed out by the cab, in a side street, at the garden gate, with open country on the far side. But those three hours' wait at the *Lion d'Or* had so exasperated him that he quite forgot all his fine preparations. He drove straight down the village street and rang loudly at the lawyer's front door, left one gendarme outside this and sent another round behind to keep a watch on the garden walls, while he went inside with the corporal. Ten to a dozen alarmed quizzers watched all this from a respectable distance.

At the sight of the uniforms, the maid who opened the door was seized with childish terror and vanished, yelling for "Madame" at the top of her voice, and a plump little woman, whose features however maintained great tranquillity, slowly came down the stairs.

"Madame Martineau, I take it?" said Gilquin, swiftly. "Sorry, lady, but I've a sad duty to perform. . . . I've come to arrest your husband."

She clasped her dumpy hands and her pale lips quivered, but she did not utter a cry. She was still on the lowest stair, her skirts filling the whole staircase. She insisted on seeing the warrant, then asked for explanations, playing for time.

"Keep your weather eye open!" whispered the corporal, in the Superintendent's ear, "or the individual himself'll be slipping through our fingers."

She must have heard this. Still quite calm, she looked them both straight in the face.

"Will you come up, please, gentlemen," she said.

She led the way and showed them into a study in the middle of which stood M. Martineau, in a dressing-gown. The cries of the maid had drawn him from the armchair in which he now spent his days. He was very tall. His hands looked like those of a corpse. His cheeks were waxen, bloodless. Only his eyes were still those of a living man, dark eyes, soft and energetic. With a silent gesture, Mme. Martineau indicated him.

"Sorry, Monsieur," Gilquin began. "I have a sad duty to perform. . . ."

When he had finished, the lawyer nodded, without a word. A slight shiver shook the dressing-gown draped over his thin limbs. At last, with great courtesy, he said:

"Very well, gentlemen, I will come with you."

He began to move about the room, putting various things scattered over the chairs back into place. He moved a parcel of books. He asked his wife for a clean shirt. The shivering was beginning to become much more violent. Seeing him staggering about, Mme. Martineau followed him, her arms ready to support him, as if he were an infant.

"We are in a hurry, Monsieur," Gilquin said, and repeated the reminder.

The lawyer crossed the room twice more, then, suddenly, his arms fluttering limply, he collapsed into a chair, twisted, caught by an attack of paralysis, while silent tears streamed down his wife's cheeks.

Gilquin glanced at his watch.

"Oh, Hell!" he cried.

It was half-past-five. Already, he had to give up any idea of being back at Niort in time for the banquet. It was going to take at least half an hour to get this man into the cab. He tried to console himself with the idea that he would not miss

the ball. He had just recalled that the Lycée Headmaster's wife had promised him the first waltz.

"That's all put on," murmured the corporal in his ear. "Shall I set the individual in question on his feet for you, sir?"

Without awaiting a reply, he went up to the lawyer and enjoined him not to try to cheat the law. But the lawyer was as rigid as any corpse, his eyes closed, his lips thinly drawn. Gradually, the corporal lost his temper, till it came to coarse language and at last he clapped his big fist on the lawyer's collar. But then, hitherto so calm, Mme. Martineau thrust the man roughly back and, planting herself in front of her husband, clenched her fists and showed herself a very loyal, determined wife.

"It's all put on, I tell you," repeated the corporal.

Gilquin shrugged his shoulders. He was determined to get the lawyer away, dead or alive.

"One of your men must go and get the cab from the *Lion d'Or*," he ordered. "I told the innkeeper we might need it."

When the corporal had left the room, he went to the window, and gazed patiently out at the garden, in which the apricots were in full bloom. He was quite lost in thought, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Mme. Martineau. There she stood, behind him, her cheeks dry again, her voice once more steady, putting it to him:

"You have sent for this cab for yourself, of course, haven't you?" she said. "You cannot drag my husband to Niort, in the state he is in."

"Sorry, Madame," he said, for the third time, "my mission is a painful one. . . ."

"No, this is criminal," she said. "You are killing him. . . . After all, your instructions are not to kill him."

"I have my orders," he replied, less ceremoniously, now, anxious to cut short the display of entreaties which he could now see was coming.

Her response was a terrible expression, as her fleshy, middle-class features were suddenly distorted with senseless rage, her eyes searching the room, as if looking for some supreme means of salvation. With an effort, nevertheless, she calmed down and again assumed that attitude of a strong woman who did not rely on tears to get her end.

"God will punish you," was all she said, after a silence, during which her steady gaze did not falter for a single instant.

Without a sob, without a plea, she turned her back on him, to kneel with her elbows resting on the arm of the chair in which her husband lay at death's door. Gilquin only smiled.

At this point, the corporal, who had run round to the *Lion d'Or* himself, returned to say that the innkeeper made out that for the moment he had not a single cab available. News of the arrest of the lawyer, who was a great local favourite, must have spread already. There was no doubt about it, the innkeeper was concealing his available transport. Only two hours previously, when the Superintendent had asked him, he had promised to keep ready for him an old *coupé* which as a rule he hired out for excursions in the neighbourhood.

"Go and search his stables!" cried Gilquin, overcome with fury at this new obstacle; "go through every house in the village! Damn it all, do they think they can cock a snook at us like that? There's no time to be lost—I am expected back in Niort. . . . I give you quarter of an hour to find a vehicle, understand?"

The corporal vanished again, taking his men with him this time, and sending them off in various directions. Three-quarters of an hour passed, then an hour, an hour and a quarter. At the end of an hour and a half, a gendarme at last appeared, long-faced: all his searches had been fruitless. A fever seized Gilquin. He strode agitatedly to and fro, between door and window, watching the day fade. He no longer had any doubt: the ball would begin without him. The Lycée Headmaster's wife would account it a piece of sheer rudeness on his part; he would cut a ridiculous figure, his weapons of seduction would be immobilized, till, every time that he passed by the lawyer, he felt he would like to strangle the man. Never before had any wrong-doer so frustrated him. Colder and paler than ever, Martineau lay stretched out, motionless.

It was not till after seven o'clock that the corporal turned up again, his face beaming. At last, he had found an ancient victoria belonging to the innkeeper, hidden away at the back of a shed, half a mile outside the village. It was all ready harnessed. In fact, it was the horse which had given it away. But even when the cab was at the door, they still had to dress M. Martineau. That took a very long time. With movements that were slow, Mme. Martineau with great gravity drew white socks on his feet and a white shirt, then dressed him all in black, trousers, waistcoat, frock coat. Not once did she allow

one of the gendarmes to assist her. Without offering any resistance, the lawyer let her do what she wanted. A lamp had been lit. Gilquin kept tapping his fingertips impatiently together. The corporal stood motionless, across the ceiling the huge shadow of his uniform hat.

"Well, are you ready, at last?" Gilquin demanded, yet again.

For the past five minutes, Mme. Martineau had been rummaging in a chest of drawers. She had now drawn from it what she sought—a pair of black gloves. She slipped them into her husband's pocket. She turned to Gilquin.

"I hope you are going to let me go with him," she said. "I want to go with my husband."

"You cannot, Madame," Gilquin replied, roughly.

She resigned herself. She did not try to argue.

"At least," she said, "you will let me follow on behind," she said.

"The roads are free," he replied. "But you will not be able to find any vehicle. There's not one to be found anywhere."

She gave a slight shrug of the shoulders, and left the room to give an order. Ten minutes later, there was a closed cab at the door, behind the victoria. Next, they had to get M. Martineau down to it. . . . The two gendarmes carried him, while his wife supported his head. At the slightest complaint from the dying man, she imperiously ordered the two men to pause, and they did so, despite the terrible glances of the Superintendent. There was thus a little rest at each landing. The lawyer was like a very properly dressed corpse being carried out. In the victoria they propped him up, quite unconscious now, in a sitting posture.

"Half past eight!" cried Gilquin, with a final glance at his watch. What a confounded business this was. He would never get there.

It went without saying, he would be lucky if he got there when the ball was half over. With an oath on his lips, he heaved himself into the saddle, and told the driver of the victoria to go as fast as he could. The victoria set the pace. On either side rode one of the gendarmes. At a few paces distance, followed the Superintendent and the gendarmery corporal. Completing the little cavalcade was the closed cab, with Mme. Martineau. It was a chilly night. Through the grey countryside, all sound asleep, the journey seemed endless, the only sound the grinding

of the wheels and clip-clop of the horses' hooves. Not one word was spoken all the way. Gilquin spent the time devising what he was going to say to the Lycée Headmaster's wife when he saw her. Every now and then Mme. Martineau thought she caught the sound of the death-rattle, and sat up straight in her cab, but could scarcely even see the victoria, grinding on through the black, silent night.

They entered Niort at ten-thirty. To avoid going through the town the Superintendent took the route round by the earthworks. He had to ring a long time at the prison gate, but when the warder saw what sort of prisoner he had been brought, all pale and rigid, he went first to waken the Governor, who was not very well, and in due course arrived in carpet slippers, then lost his temper, and categorically refused to accept a man in such a state—did they think a prison was a hospital?

"Well, as he's now under arrest, what do you suggest I should do with him?" asked Gilquin, for this was really the last straw, and he was getting desperate.

"Do whatever you like, my dear sir," replied the prison Governor. "I merely repeat that he's not coming in here. I would never think of accepting such a responsibility."

Mme. Martineau had taken advantage of this argument to get into the victoria beside her husband. She suggested taking him to the hotel.

"Yes, take him to the hotel, or wherever you damn well please," cried Gilquin. "I've had a bellyful of this! Off with him!"

Nevertheless, he did carry his duty so far as to accompany the lawyer to the *Hôtel de Paris*, which Mme. Martineau herself selected.

The *Place de la Préfecture* was just beginning to empty. There were only young lads left. Good *bourgeois* couples were slowly retiring down side streets. But the blaze of the six windows of the ballroom was still lighting up the square with daylight garishness, the brass of the orchestra seemed noisier than ever and the ladies, whose bare shoulders could every now and then be distinguished as the curtains parted, were tossing their elaborate furs from side to side as they swayed round. Just as they were carrying the lawyer up to a first-floor room, Gilquin happened to look up, and what should he see but Mme. Correur and Mlle. Herminie Billecoq, who had been

at their window the whole evening. There they were, their heads lolling out. The fumes of the evening had gone to their heads, but Mme. Correur must have seen her brother, for she suddenly leant out, at risk of tumbling to the ground, and at her vehement signalling, Gilquin decided that he must go up.

Later on, towards midnight, the prefecture ball reached its height. The doors of the dining-room had just been opened, and a cold supper was served. Red-faced, the ladies fanned themselves, standing about and eating, with frequent laughs. Others went on dancing, anxious not to miss a single quadrille, asking for no more refreshment than the first beverages which their menfolk brought them. Luminous dust floated, as if rising from coiffures and petticoats and those gold-braceleted arms which waved in the air. There was too much gold, too much music, too much heat. Suffocated as he was, Rougon lost no time in slipping away, when he saw Du Poizat signing cautiously to him. And then, in the room adjoining the ball-room—the same room in which he had seen them the previous evening—he found Mme. Correur and Mlle. Herminie Billecoq waiting for him, both of them sobbing.

"My poor brother, my poor brother!" gasped Mme. Correur, drowning her sobs in her handkerchief. "Oh dear, I knew it would be so, you could not save him. . . . Dear God, why did you not save him?"

He would have spoken, but she gave him no time.

"He was arrested this evening. I have just seen him. . . . Oh dear God, dear God!"

"Please do not despair so," he said, at last. "The case will be investigated. I sincerely hope he will be released again."

Mme. Correur stopped dabbing at her eyes and stared at him. Then, in matter-of-fact tones, she cried: "But he has passed away!" after which she began sobbing again, her face once more buried in her handkerchief.

Dead? Rougon felt a faint tremor run over his skin. He did not know what to say. For the first time, he was aware of a gulf before him, a gulf full of shadows, into which he was gradually being urged. So now the man was dead, was he? This was something he had never wanted. Things were going too far.

"Alas, yes, poor dear man, he has departed this life," Mlle. Herminie Billecoq told him, in words broken by long sighs.

Apparently the prison Governor refused to take Martineau the lawyer in.

"And when we saw him brought into the hotel in such a sad state, Mme. Correur went down and by shouting that she was his sister, she forced her way in. Tell me, has not a man's sister the right to receive his last breath? That is just what I said to that outrageous Mme. Martineau, who had the impudence to talk of turning us out. But she was obliged to let us have a place at the bedside. . . . Heavens, how swiftly it all ended. His death throes did not last more than an hour. There he lay on the bed, all dressed in black, just like a lawyer going to a wedding, and he went out like a candle, with only one funny little grimace. I don't think he suffered very much."

"And then what a way Mme. Martineau attacked me!" related Mme. Correur, in turn. "I don't know what she didn't say, she carried on all about the legacy, said it was I who had brought this last blow on my brother, just to get the legacy. I told her that if I had been in her place, I would never have let him be taken from his home, I would rather have let myself be hacked in pieces by the police, and they would have hacked me too, as I tell you, am I not speaking the truth, Herminie?"

"Yes, you are, indeed," the tall girl replied.

"Well, there's nothing can mend it now, my tears won't bring him back to life, the tears come just because one needs to cry . . . my poor brother!"

Rougon was very uneasy now. Mme. Correur had seized his hands. He drew them back, but still did not know what to say. The details of this death, which seemed frightful, upset him very much.

"Look," cried Herminie, as she stood by the window, "you can see the very room from here, these windows give such a light, look, on the first floor, the third window from the left. . . . You can see there's a light through the gap in the curtains!"

He sent them away, with Mme. Correur finding excuses for him, declaring him to be her true friend. It had been her first impulse, she said, to come and tell him the fatal news.

"This is a very vexatious business," Rougon murmured, into Du Poizat's ear, when he came back to the ballroom, still very pale.

"Damnation," replied the Prefect, with a shrug of the shoulders, "it's that lunatic, Gilquin."

The ball was a-blaze. In the dining-room, into a corner of which they had a clear view through the wide open door, the Deputy-Mayor was stuffing the three daughters of the Warden of Forests and Waters with dainties, while the Colonel of the 78th was imbibing punch, while giving an ear to the spicy stories of the Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges, who was munching pralines. Near the door was M. Kahn, loudly repeating to the President of the Civil Court his afternoon speech on the benefits of the new railway, with an additional audience of a compact body of grave-faced men—the Tax Inspector, two Magistrates, and the delegates of the Consultative Chamber of Agriculture and of the Statistical Society, all of them gaping with amazement, while under the five chandeliers a waltz which the orchestra was blaring out with much use of its brass kept the couples swaying round the ball-room, the Tax-Collector's son with the Mayor's sister, one of the Deputy Prosecutors with a girl in blue, the other Deputy-Prosecutor with a girl in pink. But one couple in particular was now causing quite a murmur of admiration. This was the Superintendent of Police and the wife of the Lycée Headmaster. They were gyrating most languorously, locked close in each other's embrace. Gilquin had made good haste to dress properly, and there he was, in black tunic, gleaming knee-boots and white gloves. The pretty blonde had forgiven his late appearance. Her eyes were swimming with emotion as she leant on his shoulder and gyrated. With exaggerated waggling of his behind, Gilquin was your perfect show dancer of the public dancing halls, torso well thrown back and all a tap-dancer's foot play. The couple nearly knocked Rougon down. He was obliged suddenly to flatten himself against the wall as they swirled by in clouds of gold-bestarred muslin.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROUGON had at last got Delestang the portfolio of Agriculture and Commerce. One morning, early in May, he had gone round to the *rue Colisée* to fetch his new colleague. There was to be a meeting of all the ministers out at Saint-Cloud, where the Court had just taken up residence.

"Good gracious, are you then coming with us?" he cried, with surprise, when he saw Clorinda enter the landau waiting at the front door.

"Why yes, of course, I'm going to Saint-Cloud too," she replied, with a grin. But when she had tucked the flounces of her long pale gown of cherry-coloured silk in between the seats, she added, gravely: "You see, I have an interview with the Empress. I am treasurer of a good works society concerned with young work-girls, in which she is interested."

The two men followed her into the vehicle, Delestang taking the place next to his wife. In his hands he held a lawyer's yellow buckskin satchel, which he clutched in his lap. Rougon carried nothing. He was opposite Clorinda. It was half-past nine in the morning; the meeting was called for ten. Told to put on speed, and take the shortest route, the coachman cut down the *rue Marbeuf* into the *Chaillot* district, which the picks of the demolition squads had then just begun to gut. It was a scene of deserted streets, flanked by gardens and boarded up scaffolding, a maze of narrow gullies which led back to where they began and cramped provincial town squares with straggly trees, all composing a nondescript big-city outcrop, now basking in the morning sun up a slope scattered with villas and unorganized market stalls.

"Isn't it ugly out here," said Clorinda, lolling back in the landau seat.

Half turned to her husband, she peered at him for a moment, with a worried expression, then, as if in spite of herself, she smiled. Delestang was seated very erect, most dignified, his attire strictly *comme il faut*. He leant neither too far forward nor too far back. His handsome, as if thoughtful, countenance and

the early incipient baldness which gave him so lofty a forehead, made passers-by turn back and stare. The young woman had noticed that nobody ever looked at Rougon, whose heavy features always seemed to be sleeping. With mothering gesture she plucked her husband's left cuff down a trifle. It had slipped back inside the coat sleeve.

"Whatever were you doing last night?" she enquired of the "great man", when he had raised his hand to stifle another yawn.

"Working late," he murmured. "I am overburdened. A mass of tiresome little matters."

The conversation again lapsed. Now it was Rougon that she quizzed. He was yielding to the slight jolting of the cab. His broad shoulders strained his frock coat, his hat was badly brushed, you could see old raindrops on it. She recalled buying a horse from a horse-dealer last month who was very like him. She smiled again. There was a hint of scorn in her expression.

"Well, and what do you find?" he demanded, losing patience at being thus examined.

"Nothing," she replied, "I was just looking at you. Is that not allowed? Are you afraid of being gobbled up?"

She said this tauntingly, with a flash of her white teeth. But he took it laughingly.

"I'm too big," he said, "you'd never get me down."

"I don't know about that," she retorted, very seriously, after apparently having consulted her appetite. "It all depends on whether one is very hungry."

At last the landau reached the *La Muette* gate of Paris, where, emerging at last from the narrow, cramped alleys of *Chaillot*, the *Bois* country opened up spaciouly. It was a magnificent morning, flooding the distant greensward with a bright luminosity, instilling the re-birth of the trees with a warm trembling. Leaving the deer park to the left, they took the Saint Cloud road. Now their vehicle bowled smoothly over a sandy track with all the lightness and smoothness of a sledge over snow.

"I say, weren't those cobbles beastly?" Clorinda began again, as she stretched out at ease. "Here one can breathe—and talk. . . . Tell me, have you had any news from our friend Du Poizat?"

"Yes," said Rougon. "He's well."

"Still satisfied with his Prefect's job?"

He made an indeterminate gesture. He did not want to say anything definite to that. The young woman was no doubt aware of some of the worries the *Deux Sèvres* prefect was beginning to give him by the harshness of his police rule, but she did not insist. Instead, she began to speak of M. Kahn and Mme. Correur. With an air of malicious curiosity, she asked for details of his trip down south, then broke off, to cry:

"By the way—yesterday—I happened to meet Colonel Jobelin and his cousin, M. Bouchard. We were talking about you. . . . Yes, about you."

He bent his shoulders, to say "very well, you were free to do so", but he still did not venture to speak. Then she called the past to mind.

"Do you remember those lovely evening parties we used to have at your house? Nowadays you are always too busy for that, nobody can get near you. Your friends complain of it. They insist that you are forgetting them. . . . As you know, I am always frank. May as well have it straight: they are saying you are fickle, my dear."

At this very instant, just as the landau was between the two lakes, they met a coupé on its way back to Paris, and there was the flash of a coarse face drawing quickly back inside, obviously in order to avoid having to know them.

"Why, that was your brother-in-law!" cried Clorinda.

"Yes, he's not well," Rougon replied, with a smile. "His doctor has ordered his morning outings."

Then, all at once, he relented, and as the landau bowedled along the avenue of tall trees, gently curving round, he went on to say:

"What's to be expected? After all, I can't give them the moon. . . . Why, look, there you have Beulin-d'Orchère, with his dream of being Great Seal. I did try the impossible. I sounded the Emperor. But without any result. I rather imagine the Emperor's afraid of him. Well, is that my fault? Damn it all, Beulin-d'Orchère is head of his profession now, he ought to be satisfied, till something better turns up. Yet you see—he cuts me. He's a fool."

Clorinda lay, eyes half closed, motionless now, only her fingers toying with the tassel of her sunshade. She let him go on. Not a word escaped her.

"The others are just as unreasonable. If the Colonel and Bouchard do complain, they are very mistaken, because I've

already done more than I should for them. . . . I put in a word for all my friends. I have a dozen of them, a nice little load to carry about. But until they've skinned me clean, they won't be satisfied."

After a moment of silence, he ran on, cheerfully:

"Pooh! If they really were in need, I would certainly do more for them. . . . But if you once open your hand generously, you can never close it again. In spite of all the malicious things my friends say about me, I spent the whole livelong day soliciting a heap of favours for them."

He lay his hand on her knee, to compel her to look up at him:

"I say, yourself now—I shall be talking to the Emperor during the morning. . . . Anything you want?"

"No, thanks," she replied, drily.

When he repeated the offer, she was quite annoyed, charging him with throwing in their faces whatever little services he had managed to do them, her husband and herself. They were not his biggest burdens. She wound up with:

"Now, I look after my own requests. Perhaps I have grown up sufficiently to do that, now."

The landau had just emerged from the Bois, and was passing through Boulogne village, in all the din of a train of heavy waggons going down the main street. Hitherto Delestang had remained deep in his seat, a blissful, dreamy expression on his face, his hands resting on that buckskin brief-case. He might have been deep in some lofty intellectual exercise, but all at once he bent forward and, raising his voice to overcome the din, cried:

"Do you think His Majesty will keep us to lunch?"

Rougon signified his ignorance, then added:

"If the sitting drags on, we usually do lunch at the Palace."

Delestang withdrew to his corner, where once again he seemed to be overcome by the most solemn thoughts. However, he leant forward a second time now, to put the following question:

"Will there be a lot on the agenda this morning?"

"Possibly," Rougon replied. "One never knows. I believe that some of our colleagues are to report on certain public works. . . . I for my part want to raise the question of this book over which I am at loggerheads with the Religious Books Itinerant Sales Organization."

"What book is that? Clorinda asked, swiftly.

"Tomfoolery, one of those concoctions manufactured specially for the peasantry. Its entitled *Old Jacque's Evening Colloquies*. A hotch-potch of everything—socialism, witchcraft, and agriculture, with even an article on the benefits of unions. . . . In short, a dangerous book."

This was not quite enough to satisfy the young woman's curiosity. She turned round, as if to enquire of her husband.

"You're rather severe, Rougon," Delestang said. "I've looked it through and I found some quite good things in it. The chapter on unions, for instance, is well put together. . . . I should be astonished, were the Emperor to condemn the ideas expressed in it."

Rougon was on the point of getting worked up. He spread his arms wide, in a gesture of protest. Then, all at once, he was calm again. He did not seem to want to argue the matter. He did not say another word, merely kept glancing at the view on either side. The landau was now half-way across Saint-Cloud bridge. Below them, its surface wrinkled by the breeze, the river stretched wide, sleepy expanses of pale blue, with the trees ranged along its banks plunging powerful, deep shadows into the water. Upstream and downstream a vast sky rose above it all, profoundly white with the limpidity of springtide, with the faintest tinge of shimmer of blueness in it.

When the landau had drawn up in the Castle courtyard, Rougon was first to get out and offer his hand to Clorinda, but she chose not to accept his aid and leapt lightly down. Then, seeing him still demonstratively holding out his hand, she raised her umbrella and gave him a little rap across the fingers.

"Didn't I tell you?" she murmured. "I'm a big girl now."

She seemed indeed utterly devoid of respect for the master's massive fists, which once upon a time she had held for long minutes in hers, the obedient pupil seemingly anxious to steal some of their strength. No doubt what she thought today was what she had robbed them of enough. Anyway, there was no more sign of that delightful petting of the disciple. Now she in turn had grown up into power and was becoming a mistress in her own right. When Delestang had dismounted, she let Rougon lead the way into the Castle, so she might whisper in her husband's ear:

"I do hope you are not going to prevent him making a fool

of himself with his *Old Jacque's Evening Colloquies*," she murmured. "It is a good opportunity for you for once not to just parrot whatever he says."

Before leaving Delestang, in the hall, she swept a last look over him. There was a button of his frock coat that worried her. The coat was a little tight and the button pulled at the cloth. Then, just as an usher came to bid her to attend on the Empress, with a smile on her lips she watched her husband go, together with Rougon.

The ministerial council was held in a room adjoining the Emperor's study. In the centre of this apartment a dozen armchairs were ranged round a large, baize-covered table. The tall, clear-glass windows gave on to the castle terrace. When Rougon and Delestang came in, all their colleagues were already gathered there, except for the Minister of Public Works and the Minister of Marine and Colonies, who were both on holiday. The Emperor had not yet appeared. They chatted together for nearly ten minutes, standing in twos and threes, looking out of the windows. There were among them two disgruntled looking individuals who so hated the sight of each other that they never spoke, but the others all seemed cheerful and contented while they awaited the serious business to come.

Paris at this juncture was much engaged with the arrival of an embassy from back of beyond in the extreme Orient, men with strange customs and the most surprising manner of greeting people. The Minister of Foreign Affairs told about the call he had made the day before on the chief of this mission. Though kept within the bounds of propriety, his account was shot with ironical scorn. Then the conversation shifted to more frivolous matters. The Minister of State furnished information on the health of a ballerina of the Opera who had nearly broken her leg. But even when at their ease, these gentlemen were all on tenterhooks, unsure of themselves. Every now and then they would clearly hesitate, seeking just what words they should use, even cutting themselves short in mid-word, ever on their guard despite their smiles and quickly becoming very restrained the moment they caught somebody's eye on them.

"So it's no more than a sprain, is it?" said Delestang, who took a great interest in ballerinas.

"That's all, a sprain," the Minister of State repeated. "The

poor girl will be quite recovered after a fortnight's keeping to her room. . . . She is terribly ashamed of having fallen."

A faint noise made them all turn their heads. Then they all bowed. The Emperor had just come in. For a moment he stood with his hand on the back of an armchair. Then, slowly, in his toneless voice, he enquired:

"Is she better?"

"Much better, sir," the Minister replied, with another bow. "I heard the latest bulletin this morning."

At a sign from the Emperor, the Ministers all took their places round the table. There were nine of them. Some spread out papers in front of them. Others sat back and examined their finger-nails. There was silence. The Emperor seemed to be in pain. Gently, he twisted the tips of his moustaches between fingers and thumb, with a blank expression. Then, as nobody spoke, he seemed to remember, and uttered a few words.

"Gentlemen, this session of the Legislative Body will be terminated. . . ."

First came the budget, which the Chamber had just passed in five days. The Minister of Finance pointed out the points made by the supporter of the motion. For the first time, there were hints of criticism in the Chamber. For instance, the speaker had said he would like to see liquidation proceed normally. He would also like the Government to be satisfied with the allocations made by the Chamber and not always have recourse to supplementary credits. Members had also complained of the slight attention that the Council of State accorded their observations, when they tried to reduce certain expenditure. One of them had even claimed that the legislative body should have the right of drawing up the budget.

"In my opinion there is no reason to take any notice of these demands," said the Minister of Finance, to wind up his statement. "The Government draws up its budgets with the greatest possible economy, and this is so true that the budget commission had great difficulty in slashing it by two millions. . . . At the same time, I think it would be wise to add three requests for supplementary credits, which are being studied. The necessary money can be provided by a transfer of credits within the budget, the situation to be regularized at a later date."

The Emperor nodded his approval. He might well not have been listening at all. His eyes had a vague look in them. He

was staring in a blind sort of way at the full, clear daylight pouring in through the central window, exactly opposite him. There was a fresh silence. All the ministers followed the Emperor in approving. For a moment, nothing was to be heard but a faint sound. This was the Great Seal turning over a document of several pages which lay open on the table. With a swift glance, he consulted his colleagues.

"Sir," he said, at last, "I have brought a proposed memorandum on the foundation of a new nobility. . . . It is still no more than some simple notes, but I thought that before going any further it would be wiser to read them to the Council, to take advantage of all possible light on the proposal."

"Yes, read it out, would you, Monsieur Great Seal," the Emperor interrupted. "I agree."

He half turned, to watch the Minister of Justice as he read. He became more animated. There was a glow in his grey eyes.

This question of a new nobility was greatly preoccupying the Court at the time. The government had begun by submitting to the legislative assembly a proposal for a law to punish by fine and imprisonment any person convicted of having attributed to himself any title of nobility whatsoever. What they proposed to do was to prohibit former titles and so prepare the ground for new ones. This bill had excited passionate discussion in the Chamber. There were deputies who were very devoted to the Empire who had nevertheless protested that in a democratic state titles were unthinkable, and when it was put to the vote, there were twenty-three who voted against. Nevertheless, the Emperor had continued to nurse his dream. It was he who had suggested a grandiose new plan to the Great Seal.

The Memorandum began by a section on the history of the question. Next, the proposed system was outlined in detail. The titles were to be given by a series of functions, so that the ranks of the new nobility might be open to all citizens. This would result in a democratic set-up which seemed particularly pleasing to the Minister of Justice. Finally, there came a draft decree. At Section II of this the Minister raised his voice and read very slowly:

"The title of Count shall be granted after five years work in any function or position, or after having been awarded by us the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour," to Ministers and

members of our Privy Council, to Cardinals, Marshals, Admirals and Senators, to Ambassadors and Divisional Generals who have held supreme command."

He paused for a moment, his glance asking the Emperor if he had left anybody out. His head drooping a little to his right shoulder, the Emperor appeared to reflect, then at last murmured:

"I rather think you should add Presidents of the Legislative Body and of the Council of State."

The Great Seal nodded quickly, to show how much he agreed, and he hastened to make a marginal note. He was then just about to go on reading, when the Minister of Public Instruction and Faiths interrupted him. He had an omission to point out:

"Archbishops . . ." he began.

"I am sorry," said the Minister of Justice, drily, "Archbishops are not to be more than barons. May I first read the whole decree?"

But he had now lost his place in all that mass of paper. There was a long pause while he looked for a sheet which had got lost among the others. Rougon was sitting square in his chair. His head was sunk in those broad peasant shoulders of his, and there was a faint grin on his lips. When he turned his head, it was to see his neighbour, the Minister of State, incidentally the last representative of an ancient Norman family, also smiling a subtle smile of contempt. Both then signalled to each other with faint twitching of their chins. The parvenu and the aristocrat met on common ground.

"Oh, here we are," resumed the Great Seal. "Article III: the title of Baron will be granted to (1) members of the legislative body three times honoured by the mandate of their fellow citizens; (2) to Councillors of State of eight years standing; (3) to senior Presidents of the Assize Courts and to the Central Public Prosecutor, to Divisional Generals and to Vice-Admirals, to Archbishops and to Ministers—plenipotentiary—of five years standing, if possessors of the rank of Commander of the Legion of Honour. . . ."

In this way he proceeded to read further. Presidents of other courts and Public Prosecutors, Brigade Generals and Counter-Admirals, Bishops and all and sundry, down to Mayors of leading towns of the first class with prefectures, were also to be made barons, though here ten years service was required.

"Then everybody's going to be a baron," muttered Rougon.

Affecting to look on him as a badly brought-up person, his colleagues assumed masks of great gravity, to indicate that they thought his interjection a very out of place witticism. The Emperor did not seem to have heard at all. And when the reading was finished, he asked:

"Well, gentlemen, what do you say to the proposal?"

There was hesitation. They would wait for a more direct question.

"Monsieur Rougon," His Majesty said, "what do you think of the proposal?"

"Good Heavens, sir," replied the Minister of the Interior, with his usual smile, "I really can't say I think much of it. It opens the way to the worst of all dangers, that of ridicule. I mean what I say: I would be apprehensive of all these barons finding themselves figures of fun. . . . This is not to advance my more serious reasons—the egalitarian sentiments which rule today and the crazy wave of vanity to which such a system would give rise. . . ."

But here the Minister of Justice weighed in, very hurt, spiteful indeed, defending his proposal, as if attacked personally. He said he himself was a man of the middle-classes, son of such, one, that is, who could never be suspected of assailing the egalitarian principles of modern society. The new nobility should be a Democratic nobility. This expression—"a democratic nobility"—seemed so well to express his concept of it that he repeated it several times.

Without losing his temper, still smiling, Rougon replied. The Great Seal, a small man, wiry and very dark complexioned, then descended to attacking Rougon with wounding personalities. The Emperor seemed to stay completely outside the dispute. His shoulders swaying slightly, he again stared at that great flood of light pouring in through the window facing him. All the same, when other voices were raised and his dignity seemed to be menaced, he did murmur:

"Gentlemen, please, gentlemen!" Then, after a short pause, he said:

"Perhaps M. Rougon is right. The solution is not yet mature enough. We shall have to examine other bases. We shall see later."

The Council of Ministers now turned to the consideration

of less weighty matters. Above all, they discussed the "*Century*" newspaper (*Le Siècle*), an article in which had just badly upset the Court. Never a week passed but the Emperor found someone of his courtiers begging him to suppress this paper, which was the only republican organ still really alive. But the Emperor himself had rather a weak spot for the press. In the seclusion of his study he often found amusement in writing long articles in answer to attacks on his régime. His unconfessed dream was to create his own newspaper, in which he could publish manifestoes and write polemical articles. However, today His Majesty did agree that *Le Siècle* should be told about it.

Messieurs the Ministers here thought the sitting was over. This was plain from the way they had hitched themselves to the very edge of their chairs. The Minister of War, a general with a bored air who had not uttered a word throughout, was even pulling his gloves from his pocket, when Rougon suddenly planted his elbows firmly on the table and began:

"Sir," he said, "I would like to bring to the Council's notice a clash which has developed between the distributors of religious literature and myself, about a work submitted for approval."

His colleagues made themselves comfortable again in their chairs. The Emperor half turned and gave a faint nod to his Minister of the Interior to proceed.

Rougon first plunged into introductory details. His smile and that good-natured air had vanished. Leaning against the table, his right arm occasionally sweeping the baize—a familiar gesture—he told them that it had been his wish to take the chair himself at one of the recent sittings of the Commission, to stimulate the enthusiasm of its members.

"I told them the régime's views concerning improvements to be introduced in the important services which they maintain. . . . Book peddling would be a great menace if, becoming a weapon in the hands of revolutionaries, it resulted in stirring up disputes and animosities. This meant, I said, that it was the Commission's duty to turn down any work tending to foment or exacerbate passions which no longer fit our age. It should on the other hand welcome all books the decency of which seems likely to prompt the worship of God, love of the fatherland, gratitude to our Sovereign."

For all their moroseness, the Ministers all thought it their

duty to signify approval of the concluding phrase of this exposé:

"The number of bad books increases daily," Rougon continued. "They constitute a rising flood against which the country cannot be too well protected. Of twelve books published, eleven and a half deserve burning. That is the proportion. . . . Never were there so many stocks producing feelings worthy of condemnation, subversive theories, monstrous anti-social ideas. . . . I sometimes have to read certain works, and I can vouch for all I say from personal knowledge."

The Minister of Public Instruction ventured an interjection:

"Novels . . ." he began.

"I never read novels," Rougon declared, bluntly.

There came a gesture of shocked horror from his colleague. He rolled his eyes, really shocked by this, as if to swear that he too never read such things. He made his position quite clear.

"All I wanted to say was that novels in particular are tainted food, served up to satisfy the unhealthy curiosity of the crowd."

"No doubt," resumed the Minister of the Interior. "But there are other works quite as dangerous. I mean those works of popularization of ideas in which their authors strive to put in reach of the peasant and the worker a distortion of social science and of economics, the most evident result of all of which is to upset feeble brains. . . . At this very moment a book of this sort, called the *Old Jacques' Evening Colloquies* is before the Commission. In it there is a sergeant who returns to his native village and chats every evening with the school-master and a score or so of field workers. Every conversation deals with a particular subject, new agricultural methods, trade unions and co-operatives, and the important role of the producer in the social order. I have read this work, which one of my officials pointed out to me, and I found it all the more disturbing because it conceals its dangerous theories under pretended admiration for the institutions of our Empire. There is no mistake about it, it is the work of a demagogue. Hence I was astonished when I heard several members of the commission talking to me in praise of it. I discussed several passages with them without succeeding in convincing them. The author, they assured me, has even dutifully presented a

copy to Your Majesty. . . . Therefore, sir, before exercising any pressure, I thought I should seek your advice and that of the Council."

And he looked the Emperor in the face, till that person's unsteady eyes fastened on a paper knife which lay before him. Then the Emperor picked up the knife and, turning it in his fingers, murmured:

"Yes, of course, *Old Jacque's Evening Colloquies*." Then, without making his own position any clearer, he squinted to left and to right round the table.

"Perhaps you have glanced at this book, gentlemen. I should like to learn. . . ."

He did not even finish his sentence, it ended in a mumble. The Ministers shot furtive glances at one another, each one thinking the next might be able to reply and give an opinion, but it was clear that not one of them even knew of the book's existence. At last the Minister of War took it on himself to indicate their collective ignorance. The Emperor twisted his moustaches. He was in no hurry.

"And you, Monsieur Delestang?" he asked.

Delestang fidgetted in his chair, as if the victim of some inward conflict, but this direct question decided the matter, though before he spoke he glanced sideways at Rougon.

"I have certainly seen the book, sir."

Here he paused. He could feel Rougon's big grey eyes on him. But, seeing the manifest satisfaction of the Emperor, he forged ahead, though his lips did quiver a little. "And I am sorry to have to say," he said, "that I am not of the same opinion as my friend and colleague the Minister of the Interior. . . . There is no doubt at all but that this work might well include certain strictures and make far more of the slow pace, and the prudence, with which any truly advantageous progress is to be accomplished. But for all that these *Old Jacques' Evening Colloquies* still seem to me a book written with the best of intentions. The aspirations regarding the future which it expresses in no way harm the established forms of the Empire. Indeed, quite the contrary, they are in a sense a development of these which might legitimately be expected. . . ."

He broke off again. In spite of the care with which he turned to face the Emperor he was aware of Rougon's huge bulk leaning forward on his elbows, his face blank with astonishment,

on the other side of the table. As a rule, Delestang had always taken the great man's side. This gave the latter a hope that even at the eleventh hour a word from him might rally his rebellious disciple to his side.

"Now, come," he cried—and as he interlaced them, his fingers cracked—"let us take a concrete example. I am sorry I did not bring the book with me. . . . But take this instance—there is a chapter, which I recall quite clearly, in which old Jacques discusses a couple of beggars—tramps—going from house to house in the village. The schoolmaster puts a question to him, and he says he will show the peasants how to ensure that they never see a single poor man among them. An elaborate system follows, how to wipe out pauperism, and we plunge into definitely communistic theories. . . . The Minister of Agriculture and Commerce cannot possibly approve of that chapter."

All at once, Delestang gained courage. He turned, to face Rougon.

"Really, 'definitely communistic theories'," he cried, "you indeed go too far. All I saw in it was a neat exposition of the principles of organization."

As he spoke, he fumbled in his brief-case.

"As a matter of fact, I happen to have the book here," he said, at last.

He now began to read the chapter in question. He read in a soft, monotonous voice. At certain passages his handsome statesman's head assumed an expression of extreme solemnity. The Emperor listened very seriously. He actually seemed to enjoy some of the more sentimental parts, where the author made his peasants talk with childlike silliness. The Ministers for their part were delighted. What a lovely story this did make! Rougon abandoned by Delestang, whom he had succeeded in having made minister precisely to have his support against the undercurrent of hostility of the other ministers!

Rougon's colleagues were hostile because of his always encroaching on their powers. They disliked that need of his to dominate everybody which prompted him to treat them like so many clerks, while he pretended to be the intimate counsellor and right hand of the Emperor. He was now going to be quite isolated. They would have to cultivate this fellow Delestang.

"There is perhaps a word here and there," murmured the Emperor, when the reading was finished. "But on the whole, I really don't see. . . . Do you, gentlemen?"

The ministers all affirmed that they found the chapter quite innocent.

Rougon made no attempt to reply to this. He seemed to bow to the inevitable. Then, all at once, he returned to the charge, or rather, attacked Delestang himself. For some minutes more the two men argued, with curt phrases. The handsome Minister of Agriculture grew quite bellicose, spiteful, indeed, and gradually Rougon himself got worked up. For the first time, he was feeling his power creaking under him. Suddenly he rose and with a fierce gesture addressed the Emperor.

"Sir," he said, "this is a misfortune. Approval will now be given because Your Majesty in his wisdom thinks the book is not dangerous. But, sir, I must in all seriousness point out that there would be the most dire peril in giving France but half the liberties which this so-called old Jacques asks for. . . . You called me to power in terrible circumstances. You told me that I was not to try by untimely moderation to reassure those who were trembling. I made myself a feared man, as you wished. I thought that thereby I was suiting myself to your precise instructions, and till now I thought I had been rendering you the service you expected of me. If any man charges me with being too harsh, if I am reproached with abusing the powers with which Your Majesty invested me, such charges, sir, can only come from someone who is opposed to your policy. . . . Well, sir, let me declare frankly that the body politic is still in a state of profound unrest. Unfortunately, I have not been able to excise the ills which consume it in a mere few weeks. In the deep and treacherous waters of demagogy, anarchic tempers are still muttering. I have no wish to flourish this lesion or exaggerate its horror, but it is my duty to remind you of its existence, in order to put Your Majesty on his guard against the generous promptings of his heart. There was a moment when it was possible to hope that the energy of the Sovereign and the solemn will of the nation had for ever cast into limbo that abominable period of public perverseness, but events have shown how grievously mistaken one was. I implore you, sir, in the name of the Nation, not to relax your powerful hand. It is not in any excess of the

prerogatives of power that danger lies, but in the lack of repressive laws. Were you to relax your hold, you would see the dregs of the population seethe up and at once find yourself flooded with revolutionary demands and even the most vigorous of your servants would soon not be able to defend you. . . . I venture to insist on this because the catastrophe which tomorrow would then bring is so terrifying. Unlimited liberty is out of the question in a country which contains a faction determined to ignore the very foundations of a stable social order. Very long years indeed will be required before absolute power has impressed everybody, wiped from men's memories the very thought of earlier struggles and become so unquestionable that at last it may be discussed. There is no salvation for France save in the authoritarian principle rigorously applied. The moment Your Majesty decides to grant the people the most inoffensive of the freedoms, he risks the whole future. You cannot have one freedom without a second, then a third comes in question, till they sweep all away, institutions and dynasties alike. You have here an implacable piece of machinery. The cogwheels as they turn catch your fingertip, draw your whole hand into their grip, engulf your arm, crush your body. . . . And, sir, since I am making bold to be utterly frank on so grave a subject, I will add this: parliamentarism killed a monarchy, it must not be given an empire to kill. The Legislative Body already plays far too noisy a part. It should not be involved any more closely in the governing policy of the Sovereign, or this would give rise to the most troublesome and deplorable discussions. Once again, the recent general elections proved the country's eternal gratitude, but at the same time they did produce as many as five candidatures, the outrageous success of which should serve as a warning. Today, the great question is how to prevent the formation of a minority in opposition, and, above all, if such does take shape, how not to let it get any weapons with which to combat your power more impudently. A silent parliament is a working parliament. . . . As for the press, sir, this is transforming liberty into licence. Since I assumed this portfolio, I have read all reports carefully, and never a day but I am outraged. The press is the receptacle of all the foulest ferments. It fomented revolutions, it is a never-dying fire, the glowing coals of which light other fires. It will only become useful when we have succeeded in taming it and using its

power as an instrument of government. . . . I do not speak of the other freedoms—freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom to do what you like. These are all sought in these evening colloquies of this worthy old Jacques. Later on, they will not seek them, but insist on them. That is what I fear. Your Majesty should give good ear to what I say: France needs to feel the weight of a hand of iron for a long time.”

Repeating himself, he fought for his powers with mounting zeal. For nearly an hour, he went on like this, sheltering under the principle of authoritarianism, hiding under this, wrapping himself in it, using his whole armoury in his struggle. And despite his apparent heat, he retained sufficient cool-headedness to follow the countenances of the other ministers and assess what effect on each of them his speech was having. Their faces were pale and still. And then, all at once, he halted.

There followed rather a long silence. The Emperor had begun to toy with that paper-knife again.

“The Minister of the Interior sees the state of France too blackly,” said the Minister of State, at last. “As I see it, nothing threatens our institutions. Order is complete. We can rely on the lofty wisdom of Your Majesty. Indeed, such fears show a lack of confidence in you, sir.”

“Hear, hear!” came from more than one of them.

“I would add,” next said the Minister of Foreign Affairs, “that France has never enjoyed greater respect among the powers of Europe. Everywhere abroad the firm and worthy policy of Your Majesty is admired. The chancelleries of Europe are of the opinion that this country has definitely inaugurated an era of peace and greatness for itself.”

Nevertheless, not one ventured to combat the political programme for which Rougon stood. All eyes were now on Delestang. He realized what was expected of him. He concocted two or three phrases, comparing the empire to a building.

“Of course, the authoritarian principle should not be disturbed, but we should not systematically close the door to public liberties. . . . The empire is like a great shelter, a huge, fine building the indestructible foundations of which with his own hands His Majesty has erected on indestructible foundations. Today, His Majesty is working on the walls. But the day must come when, the task complete, he will have to think of crowning the edifice, and it is then. . . .”

"Never!" Rougon interrupted, violently. "It would all come tumbling down."

The Emperor held up his hand to halt the discussion. He was smiling. He looked as if he had just wakened from a day-dream.

"Enough, gentlemen," he said. "We have wandered away from current business. . . . We shall see."

Rising, he added:

"Gentlemen, it is late. You will lunch at the Castle."

It was the end of the meeting. The ministers pushed back their chairs and rose to their feet, bowing to the Emperor as he slowly withdrew. Then His Majesty turned back.

"Monsieur Rougon," he said, softly, "could I have a word with you?"

Now, while the Emperor drew Rougon into a window embrasure, Their Excellencies at the other end of the room quickly gathered round Delestang. Discreetly, they congratulated him—with winks and sly smiles. There was a murmur of general approval. The Minister of State, a man with a very lively mind and great experience, was especially flattering to Delestang. It was a principle of his that the friendship of ninnies brings good fortune. Meanwhile, modest and solemn, Delestang met every complimentary word with a little bow.

"No, let's go," said the Emperor, to Rougon, deciding suddenly to take him to his study, a rather small room, cluttered up with newspapers and books lying everywhere. He lit a cigarette, then showed Rougon a scale model of a new field-gun, the invention of an officer; it was like a child's toy. He was very forthcoming with Rougon, as if to emphasize that the minister still enjoyed his favour. All the same, Rougon guessed that some sort of show-down was in preparation, and he preferred to be the first to speak.

"Sir," he said, all at once, "I know I was rather forceful in my attack, in your presence too."

The Emperor did not reply, but smiled at him. It was quite true, Court circles were once again opposed to Rougon. They charged him with abuse of powers. He was compromising the Empire by his harshness. There were the most extraordinary stories about him going round. The Palace corridors were full of stories and complaints, and echoes of these reached the Emperor's study every morning.

"But please be seated, Monsieur Rougon, please be seated," the Emperor said warmly, after a few moments.

Then he sat down himself and went on:

"I am plagued by a heap of questions. I would rather have a word with you about them. . . . Now, what's all this about a lawyer who died at Niort when arrested? A man named Martineau, was it not?"

Quite calmly, Rougon gave details. This fellow Martineau was most compromised. He was a republican, whose influence in the *département* had been likely to present a great danger. He had been arrested. Then he had died.

"Yes, but that is just the point, he died. That is just what is so vexatious," said the Emperor. "Hostile newspapers have seized on the incident. They tell it as if there were some mystery about it. Their reticences have a deplorable effect. All that worries me, Monsieur Rougon."

He did not say more than this, but paused for a few seconds, cigarette in mouth.

"You yourself went down to the *département* recently, did you not? You were present at a ceremony. . . . Are you sure of M. Kahn's financial standing?"

"Quite sure," Rougon cried.

He offered further details. M. Kahn had behind him a very wealthy English corporation. The Niort-Angers railway company's shares stood high on the exchange. It was a very praiseworthy piece of work altogether. But the Emperor remained to be convinced.

"I have heard fears expressed," he murmured. "You understand, of course, how unfortunate it would be if your name were mixed up in a stock market crash. . . . But of course, if you assure me the contrary is the case. . . ."

He left this second subject to pass to a third.

"Similarly with the *Deux Sèvres* prefect," he said. "He is most unpopular, I am being told. He has turned the whole *département* upside-down. He also appears to be the son of a former usher whose eccentric behaviour is the talk of the *département*. . . . But I believe M. Du Poizat is a friend of yours?"

"A good friend, sir."

The Emperor stood up. Rougon followed suit. The Emperor went to the window, then returned, puffing thin jets of smoke.

"You have a large number of friends, Monsieur Rougon," he said, very subtly.

"I have indeed, sir, very many," Rougon replied, just as bluntly.

So far the Emperor of course had merely been repeating Castle gossip, charges brought by individuals about him. But he must know something else, facts unknown at Court, facts brought to his knowledge by his own detectives, and he was much more interested in these. The Emperor loved espionage and all underground police work. For a moment he looked at Rougon with an indeterminate smile. Then, confidentially, as if rather enjoying it, he said:

"I've got my information, you see, more indeed than I like to have. . . . Take for instance another little detail. In your office you have taken on a young man. He is the son of a colonel. Yet he never could get through his matriculation. It is quite unimportant, I know, but if only you realized what a lot of chatter these little things do cause. . . . Everybody's back is being rubbed up by these silly trifles. That is very bad policy."

Rougon made no reply. His Majesty had not finished yet. His lips parted, but he was feeling for the words. What he had to say seemed to embarrass him. He hesitated before sinking so low. Yet at last he did stammer:

"I won't say anything about that commissioner, one of your pets, Merle's the name, isn't it? The man drinks, he's rude, both the general public and your own officials complain about him. . . . All that is very vexatious, very vexatious." Then, raising his voice, he suddenly drew the conclusion:

"You have too many friends, Monsieur Rougon. All these people do you harm. You would be doing yourself a service if you were vexed with them. . . . Now look here, do this for me; dismiss this man Du Poizat and promise me to drop the others."

Rougon was imperturbable. With a bow, he said very gravely:

"Sir, on the contrary, I am going to ask you to award the *Légion d'Honneur*, officer's rank, to the *Deux Sèvres* prefect. . . . And I have a number of other favours to ask. . . ."

From his pocket he drew a notebook. He continued:

"M. Béjuin solicits Your Majesty's favour of a visit to the Saint Florent cut-glass works when at Bourges. . . . Colonel Jobelin seeks a post in the one of imperial palaces. . . . This commissioner you mention, Merle, recalls that he wears the

military medal, and he seeks a tobacco kiosk licence for one of his sisters. . . .”

“Is that all?” the Emperor asked, with another smile. “You are indeed a heroic protector, aren’t you? Your friends must simply worship you.”

“No, sir, they do not worship me, they support me,” said Rougon, with blunt frankness.

This declaration seemed to strike the Emperor very forcibly. Rougon had just revealed the whole secret of his loyalty. If he let his own credit sleep, he had no more credit, and, despite all these scandalous things, despite the discontent and betrayal of his little band, this was all he had, he had nothing else to rely on for support, he was obliged to keep it satisfied, if he was to stand well himself. The more he got for his friends, the bigger and the less deserved those favours looked, the stronger he was. With obvious emphasis, Rougon now added, respectfully:

“With all my heart, for the sake of the greatness of your reign, I trust Your Majesty will keep round him those devoted servants who originally assisted him to restore the Empire.”

The smile had left the Emperor’s lips. He took a few steps, his eyes veiled, dreaming, and he seemed to grow paler, and to shiver slightly. His mystical nature was prone to sudden violent presentiments. He broke off the conversation inconclusively, and put off till later the achievement of what he wanted. Once more he was very affectionate. Indeed, referring again to the discussion which had just taken place in the Council of Ministers, now that he could speak without getting too involved, he seemed to take Rougon’s side. The country was certainly not ripe for freedom. For a long time yet an energetic hand was needed to keep developments along a definite path, and avoid weakness. He wound up by assuring the Minister of his complete confidence, giving him full freedom to act as he thought fit, and confirming all his previous instructions. Nevertheless, Rougon thought he ought to insist.

“Sir,” he said, “I cannot remain at the mercy of malicious gossip. I need to feel myself in a sure position, if I am to complete the burdensome task for which I am today responsible.”

“Monsieur Rougon,” was the Emperor’s reply, “go ahead without fear, I am with you.”

With these words, he broke off the interview and went to the door. Rougon followed him out. They had to make their

way through a number of rooms, to reach the dining-room. But just before they went in, the Emperor turned round and led Rougon aside into a corner.

"So this means," he suddenly asked, in a whisper, "that you do not approve of the system of nobility which the Minister of Justice has proposed? I really would have liked to see you in favour of the plan. Do look into it!" Then, without awaiting a reply, he added with stubborn calm: "No hurry. I can wait. Ten years, if necessary."

After lunch, which scarcely lasted half an hour, the ministers passed to a small neighbouring sitting-room near by, where coffee was served, and here they remained for a little while, standing round the Emperor, chatting. With all the boldness of a woman well inured to the company of statesmen, Clorinda, whom the Empress had kept back too, now suddenly appeared, to look for her husband. There was a general excitement and the conversation changed, but the Emperor was so gallant to the young woman, and in a moment was pressing her so hard, craning his neck and squinting at her, that the gentlemen thought it tactful to draw discreetly to one side. First four of them, then three others, went outside, on to the terrace, through a French window. Only two stayed behind, for propriety's sake.

Cloaking his usual lofty dignity with an air of affability, the Minister of State had been most cordial to Delestang, and, now, taking him to the end of the terrace, began pointing out landmarks in distant Paris. And there in the sunlight stood Rougon too, absorbed in the spectacle of the great city laid out across the horizon, like so much bluish mist, billowing beyond the huge green cloth of the *Bois de Boulogne*.

Clorinda was at her loveliest on this occasion. Badly dressed as usual, with that trailing gown of pale cerise silk, she looked as if she had dressed in a great hurry, prompted by some sudden whim. Laughing, waving her arms, she seemed to be offering her whole being to the Emperor. She had finally made his conquest at a ball at the Ministry of Marine. She had gone as the *Queen of Hearts*, with diamond hearts round her neck, at her wrists and her knees, and since that evening seemed to have remained one of the Emperor's lady friends, delighted whenever His Majesty found her beautiful.

"Look, Monsieur Delestang," the Minister of State was saying to his colleague, out on the terrace, "over there to the

left, isn't that blue of the dome of the *Panthéon* simply ravishing?"

And while the husband marvelled, the Minister of State himself managed to squint a curious eye-back through the open French window, into the small drawing-room. The Emperor was stooping and talking right into that young woman's face, and she was leaning back, as if to escape him, with ringing laughter. One could just catch the hint of His Majesty's profile, a long ear, a big red nose, fleshy lips lost under those rustling moustaches of his, and the fugitive glimpse of the cheek and the eye seemed all alight with longing, that sensual hunger of a man intoxicated by a woman's odour, while, seductively exacerbating his desire, Clorinda with imperceptible movements of her head was saying no, at the same time as by her breath and every laugh of her she fanned the flames she had so cleverly started.

When the Ministers went back inside, the young woman was just getting up and saying—though of course one could not know in response to what remark of the Emperor's:

"Ah! Your Majesty must never count on that, I am as stubborn as a mule."

In spite of their disagreement, Rougon returned to Paris together with Delestang and Clorinda. The latter seemed anxious to make her peace with him. There was not a trace now of that tense uneasiness which had prompted unpleasant topics before. She even vouchsafed him a glance of smiling sympathy from time to time. When they were going through the *Bois* and the landau, bathed in sunlight, was bowling round the lakes, she lay back luxuriously and with a sigh of delight murmured:

"Oh, what a lovely day it is today!"

Then, after a moment's day-dreaming, she put a question to her husband:

"Tell me," she said, "your sister, Mme. de Combelot—is she still gone on the Emperor?"

"Henriette is crazy," was all Delestang replied, with a shrug of the shoulders.

Rougon gave details.

"Yes, indeed, it still goes on," he said. "I am told that one evening recently she grovelled at his feet. . . . He helped her up and said she should be patient. . . ."

"Then let her be patient!" cried Clorinda, excitedly. "There will be others before her turn comes."

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLORINDA was at the time going through an expansion of waywardness and power together. She was still at bottom the overgrown, eccentric young girl who had once ridden a hired hack about Paris in search of a husband, but she had now grown into a woman, larger of bust, solid of hip, calmly pulling off the most unusual feats and enjoying the realization of her long-cherished dream of being a power. Those never-ending errands to out-of-the-way parts of the town, that flood of correspondence with every corner of France and Italy, that continuous rubbing shoulders with political figures into whose intimate books she wormed her way, all that disorderly activity, full of omissions and lacking any consistent aim, had at last brought her to an indubitable position of real influence. She still scattered in her trail outrageous things, madcap schemes, extravagant expectations, still trotted round with her that enormous dilapidated brief-case tied with string, tucking it under her arm like a sort of doll, all with such conviction that at the sight of her in her mud-bespattered trailing petticoats passers-by grinned. And yet she was consulted, even feared. Nobody could have said exactly whence she derived this power, it was all a matter of certain distant origins, many of them, springs which no longer existed and it would have been hard now to discover. The most that was known was a matter of odd tags of the story and tittle-tattle to be whispered one to another. But the totality of this curious personality escaped one, with her eccentric fantasies, her sound commonsense which men listened to and obeyed, and that superb body in which possibly resided the sole secret of her reign eluded everybody. For that matter, the background of Clorinda's success mattered little. It was enough to know that she reigned, however fantastic a monarch she was. She was revered, and that was all.

For this young woman it was a period of domination. In her home—in her dressing-room, to be precise, with its badly washed-out basins—she centralized all the political life of the

courts of Europe. How, nobody could guess, she had news and detailed reports before the ambassadors did, and she knew the slightest change in the heart-beat of governments. She therefore kept her own court, and there were bankers, and diplomatists and intimate friends who attended in the hope of getting something out of her. The bankers above all were very assiduous courtiers. All at once, she had enabled one to make about a hundred millions, simply by confiding to him an impending change of government in a neighbouring country.

She herself scorned such commerce of petty politics. She babbled all she knew, diplomatic gossip and the international intrigues of the capitals, for the sheer pleasure of talking and showing that she kept her eye simultaneously on Turin, Vienna, Madrid, London, even Berlin and Petersburg, so that there was a flow of never-exhausted information on the health of kings, on their love-affairs, their habits, on the political personalities of every country, even the scandals of the smallest German duchy. She would sum up statesmen in a phrase, flitting from north to south without rhyme or reason, carelessly sticking in her fingers and stirring up kingdoms, treating every one of them as her own territory, as if she kept the whole vast earth, with its cities and its peoples, in her own little toy-box, setting up the pasteboard houses and little wooden men as the whim took her. And when sheer fatigue of chattering made her silent, she would indulge in a favourite gesture, put thumb on middle-finger and snap them, as if to insist that none of it was worth a crack of her fingers.

Amid all this many-sided but confused preoccupation with things, what at the moment really interested her passionately was a matter of the utmost gravity of which she made a point of saying nothing at all, though for that matter she could not quite refuse herself the luxury of an occasional hint. She wanted Venice. When she spoke of the great Italian minister, she said "Cavour" in a most familiar way. She would add: "He was against, but I insisted. He understood." Morning and afternoon she was likely to be closeted with de Rusconi at the Italian Legation. For that matter, the "cause" was going very well, at the moment. Her mind at rest, throwing back that stupid Goddess-like forehead and speaking like a sleep-walker, she let slip broken, disconnected phrases, mere tatters of the admission that there had been some sort of secret interview

between the Emperor and a foreign statesman, there was some scheme for a treaty of alliance such as certain newspaper articles had mooted, and there would be a war in the spring.

There were other days when she was in a savage temper, kicking chair and table legs in her room, tipping over basins, breaking things. A right regal temper it was, all about idiot ministers who had let her down, all the fury of a queen seeing her realm go from bad to worse. On such days she would raise her naked arm in a splendid, tragic gesture and, shaking her fist towards the south-west, where Italy lay, would repeat:

"Oh, if only I were there, they would never commit such follies."

Her engagement in the affairs of states, however, was never any hindrance to Clorinda's simultaneously carrying on all sorts of other activities, in which in the end she seemed to get lost. She was often to be found sitting up in bed, her enormous brief-case tipped out on to the counterpane, up to her elbows in papers, beside herself, weeping for mortification, losing her way altogether in the seething mass of loose sheets, among which she was trying to find a lost paper. And then she would come upon it mixed up in the dirty linen!

Whenever she set forth to wind up one piece of business she invariably started two or three others *en route*. Her manoeuvres increased in complexity, she lived in a permanent state of exacerbation, prey to a whirlwind of ideas and events, moving on the surface of deep waters and complexities of intrigue, occult and undecipherable. When evening came, after days of traipsing about Paris, and she got back to her house with her legs aching from having climbed so many stairs, bringing with her in her skirts indefinable scents of the localities she had visited, nobody could have guessed at half the dealings she had conducted all over the city. Indeed, if one asked her, she just laughed, she herself did not always remember it all.

It was at this time that the astonishing idea came into her head to take a private room in one of the main boulevard restaurants. She said her house in the *rue du Colisée* was so out of the way, she needed a *pied-à-terre* which was central, and she turned this private restaurant room into her office. For two months it was here that she saw people, the waiters having the job of receptionists, announcing the most elevated personalities. High officials, ambassadors, members of the government, all

called at her restaurant. Totally unconcerned, she sat them down on a divan with springs broken by last season's carnival couples, while she sat in state at the table, from which the white cloth was never removed, and which was covered with bread-crumbs and papers. There was one occasion when she felt suddenly unwell and calmly climbed up to the attics to lie down in the room of the waiter who was looking after her, a big black-haired rascal whom she permitted to kiss her, refusing to quit and go home till it was nearly midnight.

In spite of everything, however, Delestang was happy. He seemed not to notice his wife's eccentricities. She was now completely his mistress and made whatever use of him she chose, without his daring to utter a sound. His temperament predisposed him to this slavery. He got too much out of the secret surrender of his will ever to attempt rebellion. Whenever she did choose to put up with him in her room it would be he who in the morning waited on her when she got up, searching for the odd lost boot under the chairs or rummaging in the linen-cupboard to find her a slip without a hole in it. He was satisfied if in public he could retain his pose of the smiling, superior male. Indeed, he used to speak of his wife with such serenity and loving protection that he was almost respected for it.

When she had thus become the all-powerful mistress of her affairs, Clorinda had had the notion of bringing her mother back from Turin, saying she now wanted the Countess de Balbi to spend six months of every year with her. There was then a sudden flowering of daughterly love. She turned one floor of the house inside-out to be able to put the old lady up as close to her own rooms as possible, even having a communicating door let into the wall, so she might go straight from her dressing-room to her mother's bedroom. Particularly when Rougon was there, she flaunted her affection for her mother with the most outrageous show of Italian endearments. However could she have resigned herself so long to live apart from her mother, she who had never been without her before her marriage? She charged herself with hard-heartedness. But this had not been her fault, she had been obliged to yield to the advice of others, it was alleged necessity, still not quite clear to her.

Rougon received this revolt without flinching. He no longer asked her questions. He had given up trying to make her one of Paris's distinguished ladies. There had been a time when she

might have occupied his leisure time, those weeks when his blood was smouldering with the fever of inactivity, and his limbs were alive with those longings which the retired wrestler feels. Today, in the full throes of his fight, he hardly gave a thought to such things. His modicum of sensuality was absorbed by fourteen hours work per day. However, he still treated her affectionately, with a hint of that scorn which he showed all women, and still came to see her from time to time, his eyes seeming aglow with a revival of the old passion, still unsatisfied. She was still his weakness, the only flesh which troubled him.

Ever since Rougon had been living at the ministry, where his friends complained they could no longer meet him intimately, Clorinda had conceived the notion of receiving them at her house. Gradually the custom became established, and, the more to underline that her *at homes* took the place of those at the *rue Marbeuf* house, she fixed them, like his, on Thursdays and Sundays. The only difference was that at the *rue du Colisée* people stayed on till one in the morning. She received her guests in her boudoir. Delestang still kept the big drawing-room locked, from fear of grease spots. As the boudoir was very small, she used to leave her bedroom and dressing-room both open, so that more often than not the company crowded into her bedroom, among the pretty rags lying about.

Thursdays and Sundays, Clorinda's great concern was to get back in time to dine early and do the honours of her party. In spite of her efforts to remember, this still did not prevent her on two occasions completely forgetting them and being aghast when she found them all round her bed when, after midnight, she did get home. One Thursday, towards the end of May, most extraordinary, she came back a little before five. She had gone out on foot and been caught by a storm crossing the *Place de la Concorde* and had not been able to bring herself to fork out the three shillings for a cab up the *Champs-Élysées*. Soaked to the skin, she went straight to her dressing-room, where, lips all jammy from a slice of bread and jam she had just eaten, her maid Antonia undressed her while laughing uproariously at the way her skirts simply streamed water on to the parquet.

"There's a gentleman here," Antonia said, at last, when she had squatted down on the floor to pull off Clorinda's boots. "He's been waiting a good hour."

Clorinda enquired who it was. Antonia looked up from the floor, her gown dirty, her hair touzled, her white teeth gleaming out of her swarthy face. It was a stout gentleman, she said, very grim.

"But of course, it's M. de Reuthlinger, the banker!" cried the young woman. "Quite right, he was to come at four. Well, he'll have to wait. . . . Get me a bath ready, will you?"

And quite calmly she stretched out in her bath, behind the curtain at the far end of the dressing-room. There, she proceeded to read the afternoon mail. After fully half an hour, Antonia, who had gone out a few minutes before, came back, to whisper:

"The gentleman did see Madame come back. He would very much like to talk to her."

"But of course, I was forgetting, Baron de Reuthlinger!" cried Clorinda, starting up out of her bath. "Dress me, quick."

But this particular evening she was most pernickety about her *toilette*. There were such occasions when her general carelessness about her person was broken by a fit of sheer worship of her own body, and then there would be most finicky demands. She would stand naked at her mirror, having her limbs rubbed with salves and pomades and aromatic oils of which she alone had the secret, she had had them bought for her in Constantinople from the Sultan's own harem perfumery, she said, by an Italian diplomat who was a friend of hers. They were supposed to make her skin white and supple and ageless as marble, especially one oil, the drops of which she used to count out herself on to a flannel pad. This oil had the miraculous faculty of immediately removing the slightest wrinkle. Then came a painstaking examination of hands and feet. She could have spent a whole day in that self-worship.

Nevertheless, after three-quarters-of-an-hour, when at last she had had a slip and a petticoat put over her head by Antonia, she suddenly remembered again.

"But the baron! Oh, bother, tell him to come in here! After all, he knows what a woman's like."

The Baron de Reuthlinger had been waiting patiently in Clorinda's boudoir for two hours now, hands clasped on his knees. Pale, chilly, austere in his habits, this banker, who was one of the richest men in Europe, had thus been made to cool his heels in Clorinda's anteroom for some time now, as often as two or three times a week. He even enticed her to his own

house, with its prudish set-up and icy correctness, this young woman's wildness being the despair of his valets.

"How do you do, Baron!" cried Clorinda, "I'm having my hair done, don't look!"

She was still but half dressed, her slip slithering off her shoulders. The Baron's pale bloodless lips curved into an indulgent smile. He stood in front of her, his eyes icy and limpid, and bent forward in a bow of the utmost courtesy.

"You've come to hear the news, haven't you? Well, I have got hold of something."

Getting to her feet, she sent Antonia out, leaving the comb stuck in her hair. No doubt she was still afraid of being overheard, for she put one hand on the banker's shoulder, then reached up and whispered into his ear. As he listened, his eyes stared at that bosom reaching up towards him, but he might not have seen it, for he merely nodded quickly, at the information.

"There!" she said, out loud. "Now you can get going."

He seized her arm and drew her to him, to ask more details. He could not have treated one of his clerks with greater familiarity. When he left, he invited her to dinner the following day; his wife, he said, so missed seeing her. Clorinda went all the way to the front door with him. Then, all at once, she flushed scarlet and folded her arms over her bosom.

"I say, just look at me, coming down stairs like this with you!" she cried.

Then it was a buffeting for Antonia. The girl could not be quick enough. She hardly gave her time to do her hair up. She said she hated dawdling over dressing, like that. Regardless of the season, she insisted on putting on a long black velvet gown, a loose tunic sort of thing drawn in at the waist by a red silk cord. Twice already a maid had come up to tell Madame that dinner was on the table. Then, as she went through her bedroom, what should she find but three gentlemen, whose presence there she had not suspected—*Signori* Brambilla, Staderino and Viscardi. But she did not seem at all astonished to find them there.

"Have you been waiting long?" she asked them.

"We have," they replied, and gravely shook their heads at her.

They had in fact come before the banker did. And, as befitted obscure characters rendered taciturn and thoughtful

by political misfortunes, they had not made the slightest sound. They were now seated side by side on the same settee, chewing at dead cigars, all three leaning back in identical positions. However, now that Clorinda had come, they did stand up, and there was a rapid murmured exchange in Italian. She seemed to be giving them instructions. One of them made some ciphered notes in a notebook, while, apparently excited by what they had heard, the other two silenced faint cries with their gloved hands. Then all three took their departure, in single file, with expressionless faces.

This particular Thursday there was to be a meeting of a number of Ministers in the evening on an important matter, a clash over a question of viability. When he left after dinner, Delestang had promised Clorinda he would bring Rougon home with him. She pouted, as if to say that she hardly expected him to succeed. It had not yet come to a rupture, but she assumed ever greater coolness *vis-à-vis* Rougon.

Towards nine o'clock, M. Kahn and M. Béjuin were the first to arrive, to be followed, soon after, by Mme. Correur. They found Clorinda stretched out on the settee in her bedroom, complaining of one of those obscure and extraordinary attacks of pain which sometimes came on her. This time she was sure she had swallowed a fly when drinking. She could feel it fluttering at the bottom of her stomach. With that loose black velvet tunic draped over her, and supported on three pillows, she was quite regal in her loveliness, her cheeks pale, her arms bare, like one of those prone figures which dream at the foot of monuments. At her feet, Luigi Pozzo was softly plucking the strings of a guitar—he had abandoned painting for music.

"You will sit down, won't you," she murmured. "Do forgive me. I have a bug inside me, I can't think how it got in. . . ."

Pozzo went on plucking at the guitar, singing in a low voice, with rapturous expression, lost in dreams. Mme. Correur pushed an armchair up to Clorinda's side. M. Kahn and M. Béjuin in the end did find two chairs with nothing on them. It had not been easy to do so, as most of the half-dozen chairs scattered about the room were lost under petticoats. When Colonel Jobelin and his boy Auguste arrived, five minutes later, they had to remain standing.

"Little 'un," said Clorinda to Auguste—she always addressed

him like this, though he was now seventeen—"do go and get a couple of chairs from my dressing-room."

They were cane chairs from which all the varnish had been peeled by the wet linen always piled on them. A single lamp with a pink paper-lace shade, lighted the room. There was another in the dressing-room and a third in the boudoir, through the big wide-open doors of which one could distinguish other rooms, apparently dimly lit by night-lights. The bedroom itself, which had once been done out in a soft lilac colour, but had now faded to dirty grey, seemed full of a haze in suspension. One hardly noticed the chipped furniture, the streaks of dust, or an immense ink stain right in the centre of the carpet, where an ink-pot had fallen, splattering the woodwork all round. At the back of the room was a bed, with curtains drawn, no doubt to conceal the fact that it was not made. Out of these shadows rose a powerful odour, as if all the bottles of the dressing-room had been left uncorked. Even in the hottest weather Clorinda stubbornly refused to have any windows open.

"What a lovely scent you have got in here," said Mme. Correur, just to be complimentary.

"That's me you can smell," the young woman replied, with utter simplicity.

And she proceeded to talk about the essences she had obtained from the Sultan's perfumery. She stuck one of her bare arms under Mme. Correur's nose. Her black velvet tunic had slipped slightly from her shoulders and her feet stuck out of her skirts. She was wearing little red slippers. Intoxicated, quite languorous from the powerful scents she exuded, Pozzo tapped gently at his instrument with his thumb.

And now, when some minutes had passed, conversation inevitably turned to Rougon. It always did, every Thursday and every Sunday. The band indeed assembled solely to thrash out that eternal subject, with an increasing under-current of rancour, a need to ease themselves by endless complaints. Clorinda no longer troubled to stir them up to it. They always had new grouses, discontented, envious as they were, piqued by all that Rougon had done for them, aggravated by a fierce fever of ingratitude.

"Have you seen anything of the big man today?" asked the Colonel.

Rougon was no longer "great".

"No," Clorinda said. "He may come round this evening. My husband is most anxious to bring him to see me."

"This afternoon," said the Colonel after a silence, "in a certain café, I heard some very sharp criticism of him. People were saying that he was coming unstuck, he couldn't hold on now more than a couple of months."

With a scornful gesture, M. Kahn said:

"Well, I wouldn't give him three weeks, myself. You must admit it, Rougon is not a régime man. He is too fond of power, he gets carried away by it, and then he suddenly strikes out, right and left, laying it on with shocking brutality. . . . When you come to look at it, he has done the most outrageous things in these five months. . . ."

"Indeed, how right you are," the Colonel interrupted, "all sorts of fiddles and injustices and outrageous things. . . . He abuses his position, too true, he abuses his position."

Mme. Correur said nothing, merely twiddled her fingers, as if to suggest that the man was a bit dotty.

"You're right there," M. Kahn took her up, when he saw her gesture. "A screw loose, eh?"

As everybody now looked at him, M. Béjuin thought it up to him to say something too.

"A bit," he murmured, "yes, Rougon's got a screw loose all right."

Lolling back on her pillows, Clorinda examined the circle of light cast by the lamp and let them go on. When they had finished, she in turn, as if to prompt them, said:

"Of course he has abused his powers, but he makes out he did it solely to serve his friends. . . . Indeed, I was talking to him the other day, and when you think of the things he has done for you all. . . ."

"For us?" they cried, all four together, indignantly.

They all wanted to talk at once and make their protest. But it was M. Kahn who had the loudest voice.

"The things he has done for me? What a joke! I had to wait two years for my concession. That was my ruin. The scheme was an excellent one, but the burden came too great. . . . If he is so fond of me, why does he not help me now? I asked him to get the Emperor to agree to a law merging my company with the *Western Railway Company*. And what did he say—I shall have to wait. . . . Rougon's aid? Hm! I should like to

see it! He never did anything when he could, and now he's powerless to do so."

"And what about me?" the Colonel broke in, striving by a gesture to prevent Mme. Correur's opening her mouth. "What about me? Do you really think I owe him anything? Does he do anything about the *Commander* rank which he promised me five years ago? True, he found Auguste a job in his office, but much I regret it today. If I had put Auguste into industry, he would be earning twice what he is now. The big ox told me only yesterday that he simply cannot give Auguste a rise for another full year and a half! Yes, that is how he ruins his good name with his friends."

At last, Mme. Correur succeeded in having her say. Leaning closer to Clorinda, she said:

"Gainsay it, Madame, he never has a word for me! I've never had a thing from him! I've still to see one of his kindnesses. He couldn't say as much, if I cared to open my mouth. . . . I did ask for things for a number of ladies, friends of mine, I don't deny it. I like helping other people. Besides, as I once said, whatever he does for you turns out badly, his favours seem to bring people bad luck. There's poor Herminie Billecoq, the former pupil of the *Saint Denis* School, whom an officer seduced, and I got a little grant for, only this morning she came to tell me how badly that's turned out, no marriage at all, the officer has shown a clean pair of heels, after spending all the grant. . . . Mark you that, it has all been for other people, nothing for little me. I thought it only right recently, when I got back from Coulonge with my legacy, to inform him of all Mme. Martineau's intrigues. In the share-out, what I had wanted was the house in which I was born, but that woman managed to keep it for herself. . . . And do you know the only thing that man said? Three times over he said he wanted to have nothing more to do with what he called 'that wretched business'."

By now, M. Béjuin too was getting worked up. He stammered:

"My case is just like Mme. Correur's. I never asked a thing of him, never! All he could do was in spite of me, without my knowing it. If you do make no effort to bag anything—yes, that's the word—he takes advantage of it. . . ."

His voice faded out in a mumble, and all four went on nodding, in unison. Then, gravely, M. Kahn started all over again:

"You see, the truth is, Rougon is one of those ungrateful fellows. Do you remember the days when we tramped all over Paris, working to get him made minister? I reckon we gave ourselves to his cause quite enough, why, we even went without food and drink for him. In those days, he contracted a debt that all his life would never pay back. Upon my word, now he finds it difficult to show his gratitude, so he's just dropping us. It was bound to come."

"You're quite right," the others cried, "he owes everything to us. A fine way he pays us back!"

For a while they buried Rougon under the recital of what they had done for him, and when anyone of them was silent, there was always another to recall a more outrageous detail still.

All at once, the Colonel got worried about his boy. Auguste had vanished. Then there came a peculiar sound from the dressing-room, a sort of soft, continuous bubbling. The Colonel hastened to see what it was, to find Auguste extremely interested in the bath, which Antonia had forgotten to empty. There were slices of lemons, which Clorinda had used for her nails, floating in the water, and with all his schoolboy's sensuality, Auguste was dipping his fingers in and sniffing them.

"That boy is absolutely unbearable," murmured Clorinda, "poking into everything."

"Heavens, if you ask me," Mme. Correur continued, softly, as if she had only waited for the Colonel to leave the room, "what Rougon lacks above all, is tact. . . . So let me tell you, while the good Colonel's not here, Rougon made the biggest mistake in his life, ever taking that young fellow into the ministry, without regarding any of the regulations. That's not the sort of service a man should do his friends. It lowers him."

But Clorinda interrupted her.

"Dear Mme. Correur," she said, "do please go and see what they are doing."

M. Kahn smiled. When Mme. Correur had gone, it was his turn to whisper:

"Isn't she delightful! Rougon did all he could for the Colonel, nor can she really talk. The fact is, Rougon compromised himself badly on her account, all over that vexatious Martineau business. In that, he showed his lack of moral sense. One doesn't just kill a man to please an old acquaintance, does one?"

He had risen to his feet and now began to trot up and down. He had just gone to the hall to get his cigar-case from his overcoat pocket, when the Colonel and Mme. Correur came back.

"Why, Kahn's flown!" said the Colonel, and, without waiting, he ran on: "We've good reason to flay Rougon, only I do think Kahn might keep quiet. I don't like a man with no heart, myself. . . . I avoided saying anything, just now, but in the café I mentioned, this afternoon, people were saying outright that Rougon was going to fall because he had lent his name to that great Niort-Angers railway swindle. And when they say that, they show they've a good nose, too. The big loony, going down to fire dynamite charges and make kilometre long speeches, even going so far as to suggest that the Emperor is behind it. . . . There you have it, my dear friends, it's Kahn who has landed us all in a pretty mess. Béjuin, what's your opinion?"

With a vigorous nod, M. Béjuin approved, just as he had already approved of what Mme. Correur and then M. Kahn had said. Clorinda still lay back, toying with the tassel of her waist-belt, which she was tickling her face with, eyes wide open, laughing silently at space.

"Sh!" she whispered.

It was M. Kahn, returning, biting off the end of a cigar. He lit it, gave three or four big puffs, for the gentlemen smoked in this young woman's bedroom. Then, going on where he left off, he said:

"Well, so if Rougon suggests that he weakened his position by helping us, I on the contrary maintain that it's we who have been terribly compromised by his protection. He has a rough way of pushing people about and bruising their faces against walls. . . . Anyway, with those slaughter house tactics of his, here is he out of office again. Well, and so he may be, I've no desire to pick him up a second time. When a man does not know how to keep his credit sound, he must have a poor head. He compromises us, do you understand, he compromises us. . . . I for one have great responsibilities, and, I may as well tell you, I am going to drop him."

Nevertheless, he was a little hesitant, and his voice had trailed off, while the Colonel and Mme. Correur were now looking fixedly at the floor, as if to avoid saying anything definite. After all, Rougon was still Minister of the Interior,

and, if they were going to drop him, they would have to have somebody else to lean on first.

"There's nobody quite like the big man," Clorinda observed, nonchalantly.

They all looked up at her, hoping for something more precise. But she confined herself to a simple gesture, as if asking them to bide their time a little longer. This unspoken promise of a new credit, the benefits of which would shower down on them, was at bottom the great reason for their assiduous attendance at these at homes which Clorinda held on Thursdays and Sundays. They sensed some approaching victory in this highly scented bedroom. Now they thought they had exhausted Rougon in the satisfaction of their first aspirations, they were awaiting the advent of some new, younger power, such as would satisfy their later dreams, which were surprisingly more numerous and vast than the first ones.

Meanwhile, Clorinda had at last drawn herself up on her cushions. Resting her elbow on the arm of the settee, she leant swiftly towards Pozzo and began puffing down at his neck, giggling shrilly, as if suddenly madly pleased with herself. When she was very pleased, she was subject to such unexpected childish outbursts. Pozzo, whose fingers seemed to have fallen asleep on the guitar, threw back his head and showed his handsome white Italian teeth. He shivered as if tickled by the caress of her blowing, and she laughed louder than ever at this and blew harder, to force him to beg for mercy. Then, when they had had a tiff in Italian, she turned to Mme. Correur and said:

"He really must sing something, don't you agree? If he sings, I shall leave him alone and stop blowing. . . . He has composed a lovely little song."

Then they all wanted to hear the song. Pozzo began plucking at his guitar again, then sang, his eyes on Clorinda. It was a passionate murmur, with a delicate accompaniment. The Italian words could not be made out distinctly. They sighed and vibrated through the room. At the final verse, no doubt all about love's suffering, Pozzo assumed a grave voice, then smiled with all the rapturousness of hopeless love. When it was all over, there was a burst of applause. Why ever did he not publish such delightful things? It was no obstacle, being a diplomat.

"I once knew a captain who staged a musical show," said

Colonel Jobelin. "That did not lower him in the eyes of his regiment."

"Yes, but the diplomatic service is rather different . . ."
Clorinda murmured, with a toss of her head.

"Good gracious me, no, I do think you're wrong there," insisted M. Kahn. "Diplomats are just like other men. Quite a number cultivate the fine arts."

Clorinda had given Pozzo a gentle little kick, with a whispered order. He stood up and threw the guitar down on a pile of clothing, and when, five minutes later, he returned, he was followed by Antonia with a tray, with a carafe and some glasses. He was carrying a sugar-bowl for which there was not room on the tray. Nobody ever drank anything else but sugar-water at Clorinda's. For that matter, her intimates knew they could please her best by drinking only plain water.

"Well, what is it?" she cried, turning towards the dressing-room, where a door had squeaked. Then, as if remembering, she cried:

"Oh, it's Mummy. . . . She was in bed."

It was indeed the Countess de Balbi, enveloped in a black wool dressing-gown, her head muffled in a piece of lace, the ends of which were tied round her neck. Flaminio, a big valet with a long beard and the appearance of a bandit, was supporting her from behind, almost carrying her, indeed. She did not seem to have aged at all. She still had the same old smile of a former beauty queen.

"Wait, Mummy," cried Clorinda, "you shall have this settee. I can lie down on the bed. . . . I am not very well. I have swallowed some bug or other. It's just beginning to gnaw me again."

There was a general shift round of everybody. Pozzo and Mme. Correur helped the younger woman to her bed, then they had to draw down the counterpane and shake up the pillows. Meanwhile, the Countess lay down on the settee, with Flaminio standing glaring blackly at the strangers in the house.

"You don't mind, do you," Clorinda said again, "if I get into bed? I am much better on my back. . . . At least I'm not turning you out. You must stay."

She stretched out, one elbow deep in a pillow, her black tunic spreading widely, a pool of ink, over the white sheets. Not that anybody had had the least thought of going. Mme. Correur was discussing Clorinda's physical perfection with

Pozzo, now that they had carried her between them. M. Kahn, M. Béjuin and the Colonel made themselves polite to the Countess. With a faint smile, she bowed to them. From time to time, without looking behind her, she murmured very gently: "Flaminio." The tall valet always understood her, and either raised a cushion, or brought a footstool, or drew from his pocket a bottle of scent, all with the same wild, brigand-like air.

At this moment, Auguste had a misfortune. He had been wandering about in one room after another, examining every feminine rag he could find. Then, that having begun to bore him, he had conceived the notion of drinking glass after glass of sweetened water. Clorinda had been watching him for some moments, for she had noticed how low the sugar was getting in the bowl, when he stirred so violently that he broke the glass.

"It's the sugar," she cried, "he puts too much in!"

"Imbecile!" said the Colonel. "Can't you even drink water quietly? . . . Morning and night, take a big glass of it. There's nothing better. It wards off all ailments."

Fortunately, M. Bouchard now arrived. He was late, coming after ten o'clock, because he had had to go out to dinner in town. And he seemed surprised not to find his wife there.

"But M. d'Escorailles said he would bring her," he said. "I promised to call for her on the way home."

Mme. Bouchard did indeed arrive, but only half an hour later still, with M. d'Escorailles and M. La Rouquette. After a rupture which lasted a year, the young marquis had taken up with the pretty little *blonde* again. Now their liaison was becoming a habit, they would come together for a week at a time, and could not refrain from kissing and cuddling behind doors, whenever they met. It all came naturally enough now, with very passionate revivals of their passion. On the way to the Delestangs in an open carriage, they had come upon M. La Rouquette, and all three had gone on to the *Bois*, laughing raucously and making spicy jokes. Indeed, M. d'Escorailles once thought he came upon the Deputy's hand when he put his own out to encircle her waist.

With them they now brought a breath of hilarity, the freshness of the dark avenues of the *Bois*, the magic of the sleeping leaves, which had absorbed their ribald laughter.

"Yes, we have been out round the lake," said M. La Rouquette. "Upon my word, they led me badly astray. . . . I was on my way quietly home to work."

Suddenly he was grave. During the last session of the legislative assembly, he had made a speech on a question of amortization. He had only done so after a good month of special study. Since then, he had assumed the staid manner of a family man, as if he had ended his bachelor existence, not at the altar, but at the parliamentary tribune. Kahn took him aside for a moment.

"By the way," he said, "you stand well with de Marsy, don't you?"

Their voices died down, as they whispered to each other. Meanwhile, after paying her respects to the Countess, pretty Mme. Bouchard had sat down at the bedside and now held Clorinda's hand in hers. She was so sorry Clorinda was not feeling well, she said, in her flute like voice. All at once, M. Bouchard, dignified and austere, interrupted the hushed conversations.

"I don't think I told you," he said, "a nice sort he is, our big man!" And before saying exactly what it was about, he went on to speak bitterly of Rougon, just as the others had done. You couldn't ask a thing of him now. He was scarcely polite to you, whereas before he had above all had good manners. Then, asked what Rougon had done to offend him, he at last said:

"Well, fair's fair, in my view. . . . It concerned one of the clerks of my division, Georges Duchesne's his name, you probably know the man, you've seen him at my place. A very decent young fellow, indeed! My wife thinks a lot of him, because he comes from her part of the country. Well, recently, we put our heads together to get him appointed assistant-principal. It was my idea, but you were all for it too, weren't you, Adèle?"

Rather embarrassed, Mme. Bouchard leant more over Clorinda to avoid M. d'Escorailles' eyes, which she felt were staring at her.

"Well," continued the divisional principal, "you just can't imagine how the big man took my request. He looked at me a good while without saying a word, in that insulting way he has, you know what I mean. Then, point-blank, he refused. And when I brought it up again, he only grinned and said:

“ ‘Please don’t keep on, M. Bouchard, you just worry me. I have serious reasons. . . .’ And not another word could I get out of him. He saw quite well how furious I was, for he asked me to remember him to my wife. . . . Didn’t he, Adèle?”

It so happened that only that evening Mme. Bouchard had had a violent quarrel with M. d’Escorailles about this same Georges Duchesne. So she felt it necessary to cry petulantly:

“Good gracious, let M. Duchesne wait! . . . He’s not worth all that attention.”

Her husband, however, was persistent.

“I don’t agree at all,” he said. “He deserved the post of assistant, and he shall get it, too. Or my name’s not Bouchard. . . . No, no, I want justice!”

The others had to soothe him. Clorinda’s mind was elsewhere: she was trying to catch what M. Kahn and M. La Rouquette were saying in a huddle at the foot of the bed. In veiled language, M. Kahn was explaining his position. His great Niort-Angers railway enterprise was in great difficulties. At the outset, the shares had fetched eighty francs on the *Bourse*, and that before a single blow with a pick. Then, sheltering behind his much-vaunted English company, M. Kahn had launched into the most risky dealings, and now if some powerful hand did not save him, he was on the point of bankruptcy.

“Some time ago,” he murmured, “de Marsy made me the offer of selling it all to the *Western Company*. Now I am quite prepared to begin negotiating. It would be quite enough if a law were passed. . . .”

Discreetly, Clorinda beckoned them to her. Bending down over the bed, they had quite a long talk with her. The Count, she said, was not a spiteful character. She would have a word with him. She would suggest the million he was asking last year to back the concession. As President of the Legislative Body he was in a good position to get the necessary enactment through.

“I tell you,” she said, “Marsy’s the only man if you want to get anywhere with that sort of business.” She smiled. “If you do manage to start out without him, you are soon obliged to call him in, to beg him to put the pieces together again.”

Now everybody in the bedroom was talking at the top of his voice, at the same time. Mme. Correuer was explaining to Mme. Bouchard that her last wish was to go to Coulonges

to die in the family house. She got very sentimental about the scenes of her birth and said she was certainly going to compel Mme. Martineau to let her have that house, so full of memories of her childhood. Inevitably the party all came back to Rougon. M. d'Escorailles told of the rage of his father and mother. They had written to tell him that he should get back into the State Council and break with the Minister. They had told him all about Rougon's abuse of his powers. The Colonel's story was all about the big man's categorically refusing to ask the Emperor for a post in one of the imperial palaces for him. M. Béjuin's lament was that His Majesty had not gone to see his Saint Florent cut-glass works when he was recently down at Bourges, and this despite Rougon's definite promise to obtain that favour for him. And amid all that storm of words, there was Countess de Balbi on the settee, smiling and examining her hands, still well-fleshed, and once again gently calling on her Flaminio whereupon the stalwart valet slipped a tortoise-shell box of menthol pastilles from his waistcoat pocket, and the Countess began sucking one with all the manner of an elderly pussy-cat who liked her food.

Delestang did not get home till nearly midnight. When they saw him draw aside the boudoir door-curtain, there was a profound silence, and they all craned forward. But the curtain fell back into position. He had nobody with him. Then, after a new passage of some seconds more expectation, there came exclamations:

"You are alone?"

"So you haven't brought him, after all."

"What, did you lose the big man on the way here?"

They were, however, relieved when they learned that Rougon had been very tired, and had left Delestang at the corner of the *rue Marbeuf*.

Clorinda let her head fall back on her pillows.

"A good thing he did not come," she said, "he's so dull."

This was the signal for a new flood of complaints and charges, with Delestang protesting and crying: "No, allow me, allow me. . . ." It was his rule to defend Rougon. When at last he was able to get a word in, he said, weighing his words:

"No doubt he might have done more for some of his friends. But all the same, he is a great mind. . . . I for one will always be grateful to him. . . ."

"Grateful for what?" cried M. Kahn, bitterly.

"Why, for all he has done. . . ."

They very roughly cut him short. Rougon had never done anything for him. What on earth made him think so?

"You are amazing," the Colonel said. "That is carrying modesty too far. . . . My dear friend, you have no need of any support. Goodness gracious, you got there by your own powers."

They now began to praise Delestang's merits. His model farm at *La Chamade* was an outstanding achievement, which long since showed him as a good manager and a truly gifted statesman. He had a keen eye, a well-functioning mind, a hand which was vigorous without being brutal. Indeed, had not the Emperor marked him out, from the very first day? He and the Emperor thought alike on nearly every point.

"Drop it, do!" finally declared M. Kahn, "it is you who support Rougon. Had you not been his friend and had you not given him some backing in the Council of Ministers, he would have been out of office a fortnight since."

Nevertheless, Delestang continued to protest. They surely must admit that Rougon was a big man. They really ought to be prepared to admit any man's good points. He would give an instance, too. This very evening, at the office of the Minister of Justice, concerning a very entangled case of financial stability, Rougon had revealed a clear-sightedness which was outstanding.

"Hah! The wiliness of a twisty lawyer, you mean," muttered M. La Rouquette, scornfully.

So far, Clorinda had not uttered a single word. Now everybody turned to her, expectant of her pronouncement. Slowly, she rolled her head to and fro on the pillow, as if her neck itched. Then, speaking of her husband, but without naming him, she said:

"Yes, scold him then. . . . They'd have to use cudgels, to get him where he really deserves to be."

"You are quite right," observed M. Kahn, just to ginger up the conversation, "the Portfolio of Agriculture and Commerce is quite second-rank, isn't it?"

This was to touch a raw wound. It hurt Clorinda to see her husband stuck in what she called his "little ministry". She sat up swiftly and then out came what they were waiting for:

"Don't worry, he'll be Minister of the Interior when we think it's time for it!"

Delestang tried to speak, but the whole band overwhelmed him, they were so delighted, till he was apparently convinced himself. Slowly, his cheeks became tinted with pink colour, and his magnificent countenance was flooded with delight. In a whisper, Mme. Correur and Mme. Bouchard remarked how handsome he was. Mme. Bouchard in particular, with that perverse taste which women have for bald-headed men, stared rapturously at the hairless expanse of Delestang's pate, while with knowing glances and gestures and swift comments M. Kahn, the Colonel and the others declared how much they thought of Delestang's strength. Thus they grovelled before the biggest fool of them all, in him admiring themselves. At least in him they had a boss who would be docile and would not compromise them. They could deify him without ever being apprehensive of his thunder.

"You are tiring him," pretty Mme. Bouchard suddenly observed, in her coaxing little voice.

They were indeed tiring him—general concern for poor Delestang followed. It was quite true. He was a little pale. His eyelids were drooping. But just think, he had been at work since five a.m. Nothing is more exhausting than head work. And with gentle firmness, everybody insisted on his taking himself off to bed. Docilely, he obeyed, after planting a good-night kiss on his wife's forehead.

"Flaminio!" murmured the Countess.

She too wanted to go to bed. With a little wave to each of them, she made her way across the room on her valet's arm. As they entered the dressing-room, they could hear Flaminio's oath at finding the lamp had gone out.

It was one o'clock. Everybody now spoke of going to bed, but Clorinda assured them that she was not sleepy, they might stay on. Nobody, however, sat down again. The boudoir lamp too had burned itself out. There was a strong stench of paraffin, and they had some trouble in finding various trifles, a fan, the Colonel's rattan cane, Mme. Bouchard's hat. Clorinda lay there, quite undisturbed, and refused to let Mme. Correur ring for Antonia. Her maid, she said, always went to bed at eleven. At last they took leave of her—and then the Colonel realized that Auguste was missing. They found him sound asleep on the boudoir sofa. He had rolled a frock into a pillow and his head rested on this. They scolded him for not having turned the lamp up in time. In the darkness of the

stairs, where a low-turned gas-jet was flickering, there was a faint cry from Mme. Bouchard. She had twisted her ankle. And as they all crept cautiously down, holding on to the balusters, they heard long bursts of laughter from Clorinda's bedroom, where Pozzo had stayed behind. No doubt she was blowing down his neck again.

Similar parties took place every Thursday and every Sunday, and Paris was now saying that Mme. Delestang held a political *salon* with markedly liberal leanings, and this was bettering a breach into Rougon's authoritative rule. The whole band had begun to dream of a humanitarian empire, in which the scope of men's freedoms was to be steadily increased. The Colonel sometimes so far lost himself as to draft statutes for trade unions. M. Béjuin spoke of creating a workers' city round his Saint Florent cut-glass works. For hours, M. Kahn held forth to Delestang on the democratic part the Bonapartes had to play in modern society. And at every new act of Rougon's there were outraged protests and expression of patriotic fears of seeing France brought down very low in the hands of such a man. One day Delestang maintained that the Emperor was the unique republican of the age. The band began to assume the mannerisms of a religious sect offering salvation. It was now openly plotting the overthrow of the big man, all for the greater good of the country.

Clorinda, however, was in no hurry. They would find her dreamily stretched out on one of the sofas in her rooms, staring vaguely up at the plaster moulding of the ceiling. While the others trotted impatiently about her, loud-mouthed, she was silent, doing no more than suggest with her sidelong glances that they might be a little more prudent. She went out less. Her amusement was to dress up in man's clothes with her maid. This no doubt was a manner of killing time. She had suddenly been smitten with a great tenderness for her husband. She would kiss him in front of everybody. She lisped when she spoke to him. She expressed great concern for his health, which was excellent. Perhaps this was just her way of concealing the absolute mastery she had over him and the fact that she had him under constant supervision. She steered him in his most insignificant acts and lectured him every morning, just as if he were a schoolboy she could not trust. And Delestang was absolutely obedient to her. He bowed, he smiled, he was vexed, he said it was black, he said it was white, according to

the string she pulled. The moment his works ran down he came straight back to her, of his own accord, to be set going again. But he remained grand.

Clorinda was waiting. M. Beulin-d'Orchère, who avoided the evening parties, often saw her during the day. He complained bitterly of his brother-in-law, charging him of working for the pockets of a crowd of strangers, but it was always so, one knew one could never count on one's own relations. It could only be Rougon who was preventing the Emperor from making him Minister of Justice. That was from fear of having to share with him his influence in the Council of Ministers. The young woman whipped up his rancour, then dropped sundry hints about her husband's coming triumph, giving Beulin-d'Orchère the vague hope of being included too in the new ministerial shake-up. In short, she made use of him to find out what was happening in Rougon's circles. Out of female maliciousness she would have liked to see Rougon unhappy in his home life too, and prompted the judge to try to get his sister to embroil herself too in the quarrel. He was to try open regrets of a marriage which he was getting so little out of. But he must have been completely frustrated by Mme. Rougon's imperturbability. But Beulin-d'Orchère did say that latterly his brother-in-law had certainly been at great strain, and suggested that he was ripe for a fall. Looking Clorinda straight in the face, he gave her details of characteristic incidents, all in the amiable manner of one just reporting the great world's gossip. Why ever did she not do something definite, if she was so powerful? But all she would do was stretch herself out more languorously than ever, just like somebody who was staying snug indoors because it was so rainy outside, and she was sure the sun would break through in the end.

Meanwhile, however, Clorinda's power at Court steadily increased. People whispered discreetly about His Majesty's being much taken with her of late. At balls and official receptions, everywhere that the Emperor met her, he was always at her heels, sidling up to her in his peculiar fashion, peering down at her throat, talking intimately to her, smiling sily at her, though it was alleged that she had still given him absolutely nothing, not even the tips of her fingers. She was playing her old game of the highly provocative marriageable young lady with no restraint, who would say anything or

show anything, yet was invariably on her guard and always slipped out of a man's grasp when he came to the point. It looked as if she was ripening off the Emperor's passion for her, constantly on the look out for the right moment and conditions when she could no longer refuse him, and thus make sure of the triumph of some long cogitated scheme of hers.

It was about this time that she suddenly showed herself most affectionate to M. de Plouguern. For some months these two had been at loggerheads. One fine day the Senator, who had always been in attendance on her and called every morning, when she was getting up, had been annoyed to be told to keep outside her dressing-room while she was at her toilet. She was all blushes, suddenly capriciously shy. No, she was not going to be teased or embarrassed, she said, by the old gentleman's eyes, with their sullen, deep flames, while he for his part, as protest, refused to come like anybody else when she was receiving all and sundry. Was he not her father? Had he not dandled her on his knee when she was little? And with a snigger he would remind her that on occasion he had put her across his knee and drawn up her petticoats, to smack her bottom. In the end she had broken off with him altogether one day when, despite Antonia's shouting at him and using her fists, he forced a way in while she was in her bath. When M. Kahn and Colonel Jobelin had asked her for news of M. de Plouguern, she had replied primly:

"M. de Plouguern is undergoing a sort of rejuvenation. . . . I do not see him any more."

Then, all at once, one could never go to see her without finding the old man there. Whatever the hour, there he was, tucked away in some corner of her dressing-room or her bedroom. He knew where she pressed her linen and would hand her out a slip or a pair of stockings, and he had even been found lacing up her corsets for her. Clorinda now exercised the depotism of the young bride over him.

"Godfather, do go and find my nail-file for me, you know where it is, in the drawer. . . . Godfather, do pass me my sponge. . . ."

"Godfathering" him thus was a caress, and now he would often speak of the late Count and go into details on Clorinda's birth, lying away and asserting that he had known the young woman's mother when she was three months pregnant. And when the Countess herself, with that everlasting smile on the

wornout features, was present in the bedroom when Clorinda was getting up, he would shoot knowing glances at her and with a wink draw her attention to a bare shoulder or a knee half revealed.

"Look, Lenora," he would whisper, "she's the very image of you!"

The daughter was indeed very like her mother. Her big-boned countenance was all flame. M. de Plouguern would often reach out his withered old hands and take her and press her to him, to whisper some dirty story. That was his satisfaction. He was quite Voltairian, denying everything and warring with the young woman's last scruples, cackling like a badly greased pulley and crying:

"But, silly thing, there's nothing in that. . . . If you enjoy it, that's all that matters."

Nobody ever knew how far things did go between them. Clorinda at the time had need of M. de Plouguern. She had a rôle reserved for him in the drama she had in mind, though she was wont to purchase such friendships, but later not to make use of them at all, if she happened to change her plans. As she saw it, such behaviour was no more than a casually given handshake of which one made no use. She had a fine scorn for her own favours which in her took the place of ordinary decency and meant that she was touchy about other things.

But her patience seemed unlimited. When she talked to M. de Plouguern she hinted at something very vague, very uncertain, very slow to materialize. The Senator seemed to be trying to work out several moves ahead, with all the absorption of a chess-player at a combination, and he would just toss back his head, no doubt because he could not see what to do. She for her part, on those rare occasions when Rougon still came to see her, said she was feeling tired, she thought she might go to Italy for three months, and then, eyes half-closed, she examined him with keen, glowing glance, a rather cruel smirk pursing her lips. She might have liked to try to strangle him with those slender fingers of hers, but she wanted to make a job of it and this great patience with which she waited for her claws to grow was in itself a form of enjoyment. Rougon was nowadays invariably lost in thought. He would shake hands absentmindedly, never noticing how fevered her hands were. He thought her more sensible now and complimented her on her obedience to her husband.

There, now you are almost exactly as I wanted you to be," he told her. "You are quite right, a woman is in her proper place, quietly sitting at home."

And when he had gone, she would laugh shrilly and cry:

"Heavens, isn't he stupid! Yet he thinks women are. My God!"

At last, one Sunday evening, a little before six, just as the whole troop of them had met in Clorinda's bedroom, in came M. de Plouguern, with triumphant air.

"Well," he cried, affecting great indignation, "well, I wonder if you know Rougon's latest exploit? This time it really is the limit!"

They crowded round him. Nobody had heard anything.

"Absolutely abominable!" he continued, waving his arms. "How a Minister could descend so low beats one!"

Then only did he tell the story. When they got down to Faverolles to take possession of cousin Chevassu's legacy, the Charbonnells had made a great to-do about the disappearance of a considerable quantity of the silver. They laid this at the door of the maid who was supposed to have looked after the house. This was a very pious woman. According to them, at the news of the final decision of the Council of Ministers, this wretched woman must have come to some understanding with the Sisters of the Holy Family and taken every valuable capable of being hidden to their Convent. Three days later, they no longer charged the maid. It was the Sisters themselves who had pillaged the house. That had caused a terrible scandal in the town, but the Superintendent of Police had refused to search the Convent till, on receipt of a mere letter from the Charbonnells, Rougon had telegraphed to the Prefect to have a domiciliary search made at once.

"Yes, a domiciliary search, that is what the telegram said, in so many words," concluded M. de Plouguern. "So then people saw the Superintendent and two gendarmes turn the Convent upside-down. They were at it for five hours. They insisted on searching everywhere. Just think, they even looked inside the Sisters' mattresses. . . ."

"The Sisters' mattresses? Oh, how frightful!" cried shocked Mme. Bouchard.

"The man must be utterly devoid of faith," declared the Colonel.

"Whatever do you expect?" sighed Mme. Correur in turn.

"Rougon never once went to church. . . . I have often wasted my time trying to reconcile him with God."

M. Bouchard and M. Béjuin tossed their heads in despair, as if they had just heard of some social catastrophe which made them doubt in human reasonability. M. Kahn scratched fiercely at his collar of beard.

"And of course," he said, "they found nothing."

"Not a thing," replied M. de Plouguern.

Then, quickly, he added:

"A silver crock, I believe, a couple of silver pie-dishes, an oil-cruet, trifles, presents which the worthy old man before he died had made to these Sisters as some reward for their steadfast care of him during his illness."

"Why, of course," the others murmured.

The Senator said no more about this, but, very slowly, underlining each phrase with a snap of the hand, continued:

"That's not really the question. It's a matter of the respect due to a Convent, to one of those consecrated houses in which the virtues that our impious social order has driven from its midst, take refuge. However can one expect the common man to be a believer, if religion is attacked from above? Here, Rougon has committed frank sacrilege, a sacrilege for which he must be made to account. . . . Of course, all decent folk in Faverolles are outraged. His Grace Bishop Rochart, who has always been particularly concerned in the well-being of the Sorority, left at once for Paris. He has come to insist on justice. At the same time, there was high feeling today in the Senate. There was talk of making a scene, merely on the few details which I was able to furnish. Finally, the Empress herself. . . ."

All heads craned forward.

"Yes. The Empress. Apparently she had the lamentable story from Mme. de Llorentz, who had it from our friend M. La Rouquette, to whom I myself told it. Her Majesty apparently cried out: 'Monsieur Rougon is no longer fit to speak in the name of France!'"

"Well said," was the general cry.

This Thursday this matter was the sole subject of conversation till one in the morning. Clorinda had not opened her mouth once. At M. de Plouguern's first words, she had sunk back on to her settee, rather pale, lips pursed. Then she made the sign of the cross three times, very quickly, without anybody

noticing, as if thanking Heaven for having at last granted her the grace she sought. Then, as the story came to the domiciliary search of the Convent, her fingers writhed with pious indignation. Gradually, she became very red in the face. Staring upwards, she sank into a profound reverie.

Then, while the others were still discussing it, M. de Plouguern went up to her and, slipping his hand to the edge of her bodice, gave her an intimate little squeeze of the bosom. With his disbelieving snicker and the loose tongue of an aristocrat who knows all possible worlds he bent down and whispered in the young woman's ear:

"Now he's put his hand to the Almighty, he's b . . . d!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR a week, Rougon heard the clamour against himself increase. They would have forgiven him everything—abuse of power, the appetite of his followers, the strangle-hold on the country—but sending gendarmes to turn over these holy Sisters' mattresses, that now was so monstrous a crime that at Court the ladies pretended to shiver slightly when Rougon came near them. Throughout the official world, Bishop Rochart made a terrible stir. It was said that he had even gone to see the Empress herself. Nevertheless, the fuss must have been artificially kept alive by a handful of clever people. There were directives passed round, so that the same rumours sprang up all over the place at the same time, with striking unanimity. At first Rougon was quite undisturbed, even smiling, amid these savage attacks on him. He shrugged his shoulders, and called the incident "twaddle". In fact, he joked about it, for at a reception given by the Minister of Justice he actually said: "After all, I never maintained that they really found a priest in one of the mattresses." When that witticism got abroad, the outrage and the impiety of it seemed to have reached their peak, and there was a new outburst of indignation. After that, Rougon got quite heated himself. He was beginning to get a little tired of it all. The Sisters were clearly pilferers, since silver crocks and pie-dishes had been found in their possession, and he set himself to insist on a conviction, till he felt so strongly about it that he actually spoke of subpoenaing all the clergy of Faverolles.

Early one morning the Charbonnells sent in their name. He was very surprised. He did not even know they were in Paris. As they entered, he assured them that everything was going all right, only yesterday, he had sent instructions to the Prefect not to let the case get stuck in the Public Prosecutor's office. But this intimation left M. Charbonnel utterly aghast, while Mme. Charbonnel cried:

"No, no, that's not what we are here for at all! . . . You have gone too far, Monsieur Rougon! You misunderstood us altogether."

And thereupon the husband and wife together broke into open praise of the *Sisters of the Holy Family*. They were most god-fearing women. Perhaps they themselves had once said a word against them, but never, oh, never had they accused them of being criminals. For that matter, the whole town of Faverolles had opened their eyes, so deeply were the good Sisters respected.

"You are doing us a very great disservice, Monsieur Rougon," Mme. Charbonnel wound up, "if you go on attacking the Church like this, and we have come to Paris, in fact, to beg you to leave them alone. . . . Dear Heaven! Can you not see that down there folk really did not know, they thought at first that it was we who were egging you on. If we had not made it clear, we were not to blame, we should have been stoned. We have just made the Convent a nice little gift—an ivory crucifix which my cousin had at the foot of his bed."

"Well, anyway, now at least, you are warned. It is up to you now. . . . At least, our conscience is clear," said M. Charbonnel.

Rougon made no attempt to halt them. They seemed very dissatisfied with him. They even began to raise their voices at him a little. He felt a faint chill rising up his spine. He stared at them. He suddenly felt rather tired, as if robbed of some of his strength. But he made no attempt to argue, just dismissed them, with a promise to call the chase off, and did indeed hush it all up without any delay.

For some days he had been oppressed by another scandalous business in which his name was indirectly involved. There had been a frightful tragedy at Coulonges. Being a stubborn fellow, Du Poizat had tried to insist on mastering his old father, "get on top of him", as Gilquin put it. He had gone to the old miser's house one morning and knocked on the door. Five minutes later, in the middle of a frightful hullabaloo, the neighbours heard gun-shots in the house, and when they rushed in, it was to find the old man stretched out at the foot of the stairs with a broken skull and two discharged guns lying in the middle of the hall. And there was Du Poizat, white as death, with the story that when his father had seen him approaching the stairs he had begun to yell *thief* as if out of his mind, then had fired two shots at him, practically point blank. He even showed the hole that one pellet had made in his hat. A moment later, still chasing him, his father had fallen over

backwards, his head cracking against the edge of the second stair.

This dramatic death, played out in obscurity, with no witnesses, had given rise to the most vexatious rumours throughout the *département*. True, the doctors did say it was death by apoplectic stroke, but none the less the Prefect's enemies made out that Du Poizat must have pushed his father over, and thanks to the very harsh administration which was grinding Niort down under a reign of terror, the number of these enemies increased daily. Throughout the storm of gossip, Du Poizat brazened it out, jaw set, clenching those sickly child-like fists of his, pale-faced but upright, halting the chatter by a mere flash of his grey eyes as he passed people's doors. Then he had a second stroke of misfortune. He was obliged to crush Gilquin, because Gilquin had got compromised in an unpleasant story of release from military service. For one hundred francs he was said to have undertaken to get a peasant's son off, whereas all he had succeeded in doing was to save him from a reformatory and then renounce him.

The trouble was, so far Du Poizat had relied greatly on Rougon, whom he made more responsible, with every new catastrophe. But he must now have scented the Minister's coming fall from favour, for he suddenly came to Paris without warning, in a shaky position himself and aware also that the force on which he relied was failing him, so that it was high time he found somebody else to cling to. He had in mind to request transfer to another prefecture, so as to avoid the dismissal which otherwise threatened, for after his father's death and Gilquin's rascality, Niort had become too hot for him.

"I came upon M. Du Poizat only a couple of steps away, in the *Faubourg St. Honoré*," said Clorinda, one day, maliciously, to the Minister. "So you two have fallen out, have you? He seemed furious with you."

Rougon avoided answering her. As he had been obliged to refuse the prefect a number of favours, he had gradually begun to sense a chill between them, till now they were indeed on very official terms with each other. For that matter, the rout was general. Even Mme. Correur was dropping him. There were evenings now when once again he had that impression of being alone that he had already once suffered in the *rue Marbeuf* when the whole troop of his friends had lost faith

in him. After days which were very full, with a crowd besieging his drawing-room, he was all alone, lost, disconsolate. He missed his intimates. He again felt that impelling need for the continuous hero-worship of the Colonel and M. Bouchard, for that warm life which his little court had surrounded him with. He even missed M. Béjuin's silences. So now he made an attempt to bring them all together again. He became friendly, he wrote letters, he risked visits. But the bonds had snapped and he never did succeed in rallying them all to his side. If he managed one there would be a tiff on the other side which broke the other strings, so he was always lacking some friend or other, some limb of his, till at last they had all abandoned him.

These were the death throes of his power. Strong as he was, he was bound up with these fools by the drawn-out work done for their mutual fortune, and when he withdrew, everyone of them had robbed him of something of himself. As his importance thus dwindled, his great strength became virtually useless, his huge fists beat at the vacant air. And when the sun cast his shadow alone and he could not longer build himself up by abusing the faith others had in him, it was his impression that he occupied less space on earth. His dream was now of some new incarnation, to be resurrected as Jupiter the Thunderer, who would need no troop fawning round him, but could make the law by the mere rumble of his spoken word.

However, Rougon still did not really grasp that he was seriously undermined. Their teeth scarcely reached his heels and he treated their bites with scorn. Though unpopular and lonely, he would rule powerfully. Now he made the Emperor his great fulcrum. His sole weakness in this effort was his own credulity. Every time that he saw the Emperor, with that impenetrable, colourless smile of his, he found him benevolent and extremely kind. The Emperor told him again and again that he had confidence in him and repeated the same instructions as before, and that sufficed. He concluded that the Emperor could not possibly be thinking of sacrificing him, and this apparent certainty prompted him to try a grand stroke. To silence his foes and consolidate his power, he conceived the notion of offering his resignation in very dignified terms, referring to complaints which were being disseminated about him, assuring the Emperor that he had strictly followed all his directives, but adding that he felt the need for his supreme

approval before he could go on with his great work of ensuring the public weal. He did indeed also bluntly insist that he was a strong-fisted man and stood for merciless repression. The Court was at Fontainebleau at the time, and when he had sent in this resignation, Rougon just waited, with all the coolness of a good gambler. The sponge was now to be passed over these recent scandals, the Coulonges tragedy, the house-search of the religious Sisters, while if he did fall, then he would at least fall from the very summit, a strong man.

It so happened that on this day when the Minister's fate was to be decided, there was a charity bazaar in the *Orange House* of the Tuileries Palace, in favour of a nursery of which the Empress was patron. All the intimates of the Palace and all senior officials were bound to attend, to pay court, and Rougon decided that he too would put in an appearance, impassive as ever. It was sheer bravado, facing up to all these people spying on him with covert glances and parading his calm scorn through all the whisperings of the crowd. Towards three o'clock he had given his staff principal a last instruction before leaving, when his footman came to tell him that a gentleman and lady particularly wished to see him in his private rooms. The card bore the names of the Marquis and Marchioness d'Escorailles.

The elderly couple, whom deceived by their almost poverty-stricken dress, the footman had left in the dining-room, rose courteously. Rougon hastened at once to take them through to the drawing-room. He was rather upset by their presence, vaguely uneasy, indeed. He said how surprised he was that they should suddenly have come to Paris. He tried to appear very friendly. But they remained frigid, stiff and sombre.

"Monsieur," said the Marquis at last, "you will pardon the approach which we find ourselves obliged to make. . . . It concerns our son, Jules. We would like to see him leave the government service. We have come to ask you not to try to retain him in your office."

And when the Minister gaped at them in utter astonishment, the Marquis continued:

"Young men take too light a view of things. We have twice written to Jules to tell him our reasons and ask him to resign his post. . . . But as he pays no attention to us, we made up our minds to come to Paris ourselves. This, Monsieur, is the second time we have been here in thirty years."

Only then did he protest. Jules had the finest future before him. They were going to break his career. But while he spoke, the Marchioness fidgeted with impatience. Now she in turn spoke, and more ferociously than her husband.

"God forbid, Monsieur Rougon, that we should be your judges, but our family has its own priceless traditions. There is one thing Jules cannot do, and that is, stain himself with a detestable persecution of the Church. It is already the wonder of Plassans that he should be where he is now. We shall end up being ostracized by all our gentry."

Now Rougon understood. He would have argued, but with an imperious gesture, the Marchioness silenced him.

"Allow me to finish. . . . Our son joined you against our will. You know how sad it made us to see him serve an illegitimate régime. But I prevented his father from cursing him. Since then, however, our house has been in mourning, and when our friends have come to see us, our son's name has never been mentioned. We had sworn to wash our hands of him. But there are limits, and they are exceeded when a d'Escorailles is in the camp of the enemies of our Holy Church. . . . I hope I make myself clear, Monsieur?"

Rougon bowed. It did not even occur to him to smile at the old lady's white lies, for these were the d'Escorailles he had known years back, when he himself was starving in the Plassans streets, these were the old, haughty, spiteful, arrogant d'Escorailles. Had anybody else addressed him like that, there was no question about it, he would have shown them the door. But he was now quite upset, wounded, taken down a peg. His miserable youth of poverty all surged back into his mind. For a moment, he felt as if he had those worn down clogs on his feet again, and he promised he would persuade Jules to resign his post. Then, hinting at the reply which he was expecting from the Emperor, he contented himself with adding:

"In any case, Madame, your son may be otherwise restored to you as early as this evening."

Alone again, he suddenly felt afraid. This old couple had shattered his magnificent nonchalance. Now he was even loth to put in an appearance at the charity bazaar, for all eyes would be able to read the dismay on his countenance. Then he was ashamed of such childish fear, and he set out. As he went through his office, he asked Merle if there had been any callers.

"No, Excellency," the man replied, with his earnest,

commissioner's tone of voice, and Rougon had the impression that Merle had been on the *qui vive* all day.

The Tuileries *Orange House*, where the charity sale was taking place, had been very luxuriously done out for the occasion. The walls were draped with red velvet with gold fringes, which transformed that vast, barren-looking gallery into a lofty gala hall. To the left, at one end, was a huge curtain, also of red velvet, partitioning off a separate hall. This curtain was looped back on cords with huge gold tassels, to match the main hall with its ranks of stalls and the smaller room which contained tables with refreshments. The floor was well sanded, and majolica pots in each corner contained massed greenery. In the centre of the rectangle of stalls was a low, circular, plush-covered seat with sloping back, and in the centre of this erection rose a tremendous fountain of blossoms, roses, pinks, verbenas, like a shower of dazzling rain. The huge glass doors were wide open, and on the terrace, by the water's edge, on to which they gave, were grave ushers in black livery, glancing carefully at the guests' invitations.

The ladies who were running the sale hardly counted on having many visitors before four o'clock. They stood at their stalls in the main hall, awaiting clients. The goods were laid out on these long benches, which were draped with red baize. There were a number of stalls of fancy goods, and oriental gewgaws, two of children's toys, a kiosk where buttonholes of flowers were to be sold, all roses, and finally, a big tombola wheel in a tent, just like at suburban fairs. In evening gowns, all *décolletées*, the saleswomen assumed proper stall-keeper manners, all the smiles of your milliner selling an out-of-fashion hat, wheedling, babbling, ignorantly praising. Engrossed in this shop-girl game, they giggled and became quite cheeky. All these gentlemen's hands touching them as they bargained worked them up to hysteria. One of the toy-stalls was kept by a princess, opposite her was a marchioness selling a purse not worth a *franc* and a half, but insisting on at least twenty for it. These two were rivals, each out to prove by her takings that she was the prettier woman, and they accosted the menfolk brazenly, demanding exorbitant prices. After bargaining wildly like thieving butchers' wives, each would give a little of herself into the bargain, the tip of her fingers, a glimpse down a gaping bodice, just to make quite sure of big money. The pretext was charity.

Gradually, the hall filled up. The gentlemen halted coolly here and there, and quizzed the ladies at their stalls as if they too were to be bought. There were some stalls where the young fops of Paris jostled each other, sniggering and making the sauciest remarks about their purchases, while the ladies showed inexhaustible compliance, offering all their goods to one after another with equal rapture. It was a revel, indeed, being in the midst of such a crowd for four hours on end, and the din of public auction rose louder and louder, broken by pearly laughter, against the background of many feet endlessly shuffling round in the sand. The red draperies absorbed the harsh glare from the lofty windows, and shed a glowing luminosity which tinged all those naked throats and shoulders with a fine pink hue. Among the stalls there were six other ladies, with fragile baskets slung from their shoulders, pushing through the crowd, one a baroness, two the daughters of a banker, three others the wives of high officials, and these rushed at every newcomer, hawking cigars and matches.

Mme. de Combelot in particular enjoyed a great success. She dealt in the button-holes. She was seated high up in the kiosk full of roses, an erection like a gilded truncated summer-house, or a huge bird-cage. She herself was dressed entirely in pink, flesh pink, which continued her nudity beyond the edging of her bodice, the only point of contrasting colour being a bunch of violets pinned between her breasts. Ingeniously, she had decided to make up her button-holes fresh, in front of her customers, like a real flower-girl—a rose, a twig, three leaves, a twist of some thread round them, then hold one end between her teeth, and tie, to sell them at from one to ten *louis* each, according to the gentleman's appearance. And the men were simply snatching for those button-holes, she could not keep pace with orders, she was so busy that from time to time she pricked herself, darting her fingers to her lips to suck the blood away.

Opposite her, in the tent, pretty Mme. Bouchard was running the *tombola*. She was dressed in a ravishing blue gown of peasant cut, high-waisted, the corsage forming a sort of wrap, which quite disguised her, so she might really have been taken for a girl selling gingerbreads and wafers at a fair. To add to it, she put on a most lovable lisp, a silly naive air which was most original. On this stand of hers the goods were classified, there were frightful trinkets for five or six *sous*,

glassware and china and leather goods. The pen scraped against the brass wire as the spinning disc showed the prize winners with an endless clatter of broken china. Every couple of minutes, when she lacked clients, Mme. Bouchard in her sweet little innocent voice, like a country girl come up but yesterday from her rustic home, cried:

"Twenty *sous* a go, gentlemen. . . . Come along, gentlemen, try your luck. . . ."

The refreshment room was also well sanded. It too had greenery in the corners. It was furnished with small round tables and cane chairs. They had tried to make it just like a real café, to be more enticing. At the back there was a monumental bar with three ladies fanning themselves there while they awaited orders. Before them stood bottles of liqueurs, plates of cakes and sandwiches, sweets, cigars and cigarettes—all the garish display of any common dance hall. Every now and then, the lady in the centre, a petulant, dark countess, rose from her seat, to bend her head over the bar and pour out a glass of liqueur. She had already got all the drinks thoroughly mixed up and steered her arms between them at frantic risk of breaking the whole show up. Clorinda, however, was the real queen here, because she was the waitress at the tables, a regular barmaid, indeed, in appearance, in a yellow and black satin gown, cut on the bias, dazzling, most unusual, a regular star, her train like the tail of a comet. The gown was extremely low cut, leaving her bosom quite free, and she moved most regally among her tables, carrying glasses of beer on a white metal tray, with all the calm of a goddess. Her bare elbows jostled the men, as she bent down to take orders, and her corsage gaped wide, but she had a ready response for everybody, smiling, unhurried, perfectly at home in her rôle. When she collected empty glasses and the money, she raked in the coins with superb gestures of her lovely arm and with practised movements tossed them into the leather pouch she wore at her waist.

M. Kahn and M. Béjuin had just sat down. As a joke, M. Kahn rapped a coin on the zinc table top and called:

"Madame, two *bocks*, please!"

She brought the beer, poured it out and stayed there, to rest for a moment, as the café just then was almost empty. With a lace handkerchief she idly wiped the spilled beer from her fingers. M. Kahn noticed how very bright her eyes

were. Her whole countenance seemed to irradiate triumph. He gave her a look, then blinked suddenly and put a question to her:

"When did you get back from Fontainebleau?"

"This morning," she replied.

"And did you see the Emperor? What's the news?"

Smiling, she pouted strangely, and stared back at him. Then he suddenly noticed a new piece of jewellery. Round her neck she was wearing a dog collar, a "real" one—in black velvet—complete with buckle and ring and bell, a gold bell in which tinkled an exquisite pearl. There were two names inscribed in diamonds on this collar. The letters were interlaced and fantastically twisted out of shape. Dangling from the ring was a heavy gilt chain which hung down her bosom, between her breasts, then was looped up again to a gold plate pinned to her right shoulder and, bearing the words: "*I belong to my master*".

"Is this a present?" murmured M. Kahn, pointing to this piece of jewellery and speaking very softly, so that nobody else should hear.

With a nod she affirmed that it was; her lips were still pursed in the same subtle, sensuous pout. This was an enslavement she had craved. She announced it now with an unperturbed shamelessness that raised it above a mere humdrum peccadillo. This royal selection of her, which so many envied, was an honour. When she had appeared at the sale with her neck strapped in that collar, on which the keen eyes of rivals made out an illustrious name combined with hers, all the women at once understood, and exchanged glances, as if to say: "So that's that". For the past month, the upper crust of the régime had been discussing the affair and awaiting the *dénouement*. It had indeed come, and it was Clorinda herself who proclaimed it, carrying it written on her right arm. If one was to believe the tales whispered from one to another, her first love bed had been the bundle of straw on which a stable boy slept in his stable. Later, she had climbed in between various sheets, in ever more distinguished beds—bankers', high officials', cabinet ministers', every successive night augmenting her fortunes. And now, proceeding from one bedroom to another, as apotheosis, to satisfy a final desire and pride, she had laid her lovely cold head on the imperial pillow.

"Madame, a *bock*, if you please," cried a ponderous man with a decoration, a general, staring at her with a grin on his face.

And as soon as she had taken him his *bock*, there were two deputies calling for glasses of *chartreuse*.

People were flocking in now, and orders multiplied on all sides, for spirits, anisette, lemonade, for cakes and for cigars. The men looked her up and down, exchanging remarks in undertones, excited by the shady story now going the rounds. And when this café waitress who had slipped from the Emperor's embrace that same morning held out her hand and took their money, they seemed to sniff at her, as if seeking on her person some trace of her imperial loving. And without the least concern she would turn the coins over, so they might have a good look at her dog collar, with its heavy chain clinking at every movement she made. This must have been an additional sauce for Clorinda, becoming every man's waitress just when she had for one night been the Empress of France. Yes, it was piquant in the extreme for her thus for her amusement to trail round café tables on the Greek goddess feet over which those august moustaches had so recently slobbered with kisses.

"It's all screamingly funny," she announced, coming back to plant herself in front of M. Kahn. "They take me for a tart, upon my word they do! One man just now gave me a pinch. I did not say anything. What's the use? It's all for our poor girls, isn't it?"

With a flicker of his eyelids, M. Kahn had stooped down, so that he might whisper in her ear.

"So, Rougon, then. . . ."

"Sh! Any moment now," she replied whispering back, "I sent him an invitation in my name. I am expecting him."

And when M. Kahn tossed back his head, she added quickly:

"Yes, yes, I know him, he will come. . . . Of course, he doesn't know anything about this yet."

From that moment M. Kahn and M. Béjuin had eyes solely to pick out Rougon's arrival. Through the widely drawn curtains they could see the length of the main hall. Every moment, the crowd grew denser. Gentlemen now lolled back on that round central seat, legs crossed, eyes drowsily closed, while an endless stream of visitors gyrated round them,

tripping over their feet. The heat was becoming oppressive. The hubbub in the reddish haze floating above the black hats grew more and more intense. Every now and then the general murmur was pierced by the creaking of the lottery table as it was turned.

Mme. Correur, just arrived, with short steps made her way round the stalls. She was very fat, and dressed in a mauve and white striped gown of grenadine, from under which her plump shoulders and arms oozed in pinkish folds. There was a cautious expression on her face, the thoughtful look of a customer on the look out for a good bargain. As a rule, she maintained, one could find excellent buys at these charity bazaars, these poor waiting ladies just didn't know, they were simply ignorant regarding their wares. But she never bought from anybody she knew personally; she thought they put the price on too much. When she had gone through all the stalls, turning things over, examining them thoroughly and putting them back, she came back to the leather-goods stall and spent a good ten minutes at this, pawing over it with a puzzled expression on her face. Then, carelessly, she took up a Russian leather note-case she had had her eye on for a good quarter of an hour.

"How much is this?" she enquired.

The stall-keeper, a tall, fair-haired young lady, who was just exchanging pleasantries with two gentlemen, scarcely turning round, said:

"Fifteen *francs*."

The note-case was worth at least twenty. As a rule, these fine ladies vying with each other to get extravagant sums out of the men, did sell things to their own sex, by a sort of free masonry, at cost price. But Mme. Correur replaced the note-case on the counter with an expression of alarm, and murmured:

"Oh, that's far too much. . . . I am only looking for a present. I could give ten *francs*, no more. Have you anything nice at ten *francs*?"

Once again she turned everything over. Nothing suited her. Heavens! if only that note-case were a bit cheaper. She picked it up again and peered into its compartments. Losing patience, the stall-keeper at last dropped to fourteen, then twelve. No, no, it was still too dear. And, after some ferocious bargaining, she got it for eleven. The tall young lady said:

"I like to sell things. . . . The women all bargain, not one will buy. Oh! what should we do without the men?"

As she made her way from the stall, Mme. Correur was delighted to find a price ticket for twenty-five *francs* left in the note-case. She went on prowling round, then took up a stand inside the tombola tent, beside Mme. Bouchard. She called her "my dear", and tucked back into position on Mme. Bouchard's forehead a couple of kiss-curls which had slipped out of place.

"Why, there's the Colonel!" cried M. Kahn, still at the bar, with his eyes watchful on the doors.

The Colonel had come because he could not do otherwise, but he was counting on getting through it all for no more than one *louis*, though even that made his heart bleed badly. But as soon as he appeared in the doorway he was assailed by three or four of the ladies, with their cries of: "Cigars, do buy a cigar from me. . . . Monsieur, a box of matches!"

Smiling, he contrived courteously to escape, then, surveying the scene, thought he had better discharge his obligation without delay. He paused first at the stall of a lady who stood well at Court. Here he bargained for a very ugly cigar-case. Seventy-five *francs*! Nearly four *louis*! He could not restrain a gesture of sheer terror. Dropping the case as if it were hot, he made off, while the lady in question went very red in the face and looked desperately this way and that, quite as if he had assaulted her. After this, in order to prevent mischievous remarks, he went up to the kiosk in which Mme. de Combelot was busily making button-holes. From prudence he did not even enquire about one for himself. He guessed that she was putting a high price on her work, but, picking out of the pile of roses the most wretched, undeveloped, half-eaten bud, he grandly drew out his purse and asked: "*How much?*"

'One hundred *francs*, *Monsieur*,' replied the good lady, who had followed the whole manoeuvre out of the corner of her eye.

Colonel Jobelin's hands shook and he stammered, but this time there was no withdrawing. He paid up, then took refuge in the café and planted himself down at M. Kahn's table, muttering:

It's all a trap, that's what it is, a trap. . . ."

"Seen Rougon anywhere about?" enquired M. Kahn.

The Colonel made no reply. From a safe distance, he was glaring at the saleswomen. Then, seeing M. d'Escorailles and

M. La Rouquette laughing at the top of their voices at a stall, he ground out:

"Young people may find it all very entertaining. . . . They always get something in the end for their money."

There was no question about it, M. d'Escorailles and M. La Rouquette were having a very fine time. The ladies were all eager to net them. The moment they had entered, there were bare arms stretched out and their names were to be heard on all sides.

"Monsieur d'Escorailles, you know what you promised me. . . . Come on now, M. La Rouquette, you must buy a gee-gee from me. No? Then a dollie? Yes, of course, come on, a dollie, that's just the thing for you!"

He and M. d'Escorailles had taken each other's arms, as protection, they laughingly said, and like this they advanced, radiant and rapturous, with all those petticoats crowding round them, all those pretty voices caressing them. At times they vanished from sight entirely, as if drowned by naked shoulders, pretending to fight them off, with little cries of terror, and at every stall they succumbed to the ladies' pretended violence. Then they made out they were mean, acted glorious scenes of horror at the prices. Penny dolls or dolls that cost a *louis*, that was all far beyond their means. Three pencils cost two *louis*? Did these ladies want to snatch the bread from working-men's mouths? It was killingly funny. The ladies in question simply cooed with delight. It was like the music of so many flutes. This downpour of gold had quite gone to their heads, they trebled and quadrupled their prices, they were bitten with a lust for sheer robbery. They handed these two gentlemen on from one to another with little winks and whispers of "I really must sting these two. . . . You just see, we can stick it on to them!" And of course, the victims heard it all and replied with charming bows. Behind their backs, the ladies were jubilant. They boasted. The toughest of them all and the most envied was a young lady of eighteen who had sold a stick of sealing-wax for three *louis*. Nevertheless, when he had got to the end of the hall and a fair hand insisted on stuffing a box of soap into his pocket, M. d'Escorailles cried: "I've spent my last penny. Or do you want me to forge you a banknote?"

He tipped up his purse to show her. The lady in question was so carried away that she just snatched it from him and

rummaged in it. Then she looked the young man fiercely up and down, as if on the point of demanding his watchchain.

It was a scream. Just for fun, M. d'Escorailles now went on going round with his empty purse.

"Hell!" he said at last, dragging away M. La Rouquette with him. "I'm getting stingy. . . . We must try to find some refreshment!"

They were passing the tombola tent, when Mme. Bouchard called to them:

"Twenty *sous* a go, gentlemen. . . . Try your luck. . . ."

They went up to her, pretending they had not heard.

"How much a go, my girl?"

"Twenty *sous*, good sirs."

And the peals of laughter began all over again. But Mme. Bouchard, in her blue gown, stared hard at them both with blankly innocent eyes, as if she had never seen them, and a tremendous gambling game began. For quarter of an hour the thing was squeaking round and round, first one, then the other, pushing. M. d'Escorailles won two dozen egg-cups, three little mirrors, seven terra cotta figurines and five cigarette-cases, while M. La Rouquette got two packets of trumpery lace, a dressing-table tidy on a gilded tin stand, some glasses, a candlestick and a box containing an ice, till Mme. Bouchard set her jaw firm and cried:

"No, no, no more, you have had too much luck! I won't let you have another go. . . . Come on, off with you, take your goods."

She had made two big piles on a table. M. La Rouquette pretended to be aghast and asked her if he might exchange his pile for the cockade of violets she was wearing in her hair, but she said no.

"Of course not, indeed. You won all that, didn't you? Then please take it away!"

"Madame is quite right," said M. d'Escorailles, gravely. "Never look a gift mare in the mouth. I'll be hanged if I'm going to leave any of my egg-cups behind. . . . I'm becoming stingy, I am."

He spread out his handkerchief and knotted them all into a bundle, and then there was a new burst of hilarity, for M. La Rouquette's embarrassment was really killingly funny. And now Mme. Correur, who had so far maintained a smiling, matronly dignity at the back of the tent, thrust her big red face forward. She was willing to exchange, she said.

"No, oh no, on no account," the young deputy hastened to say. "You can have it all, I make you a present of it."

Even so, they did not leave, but stayed there whispering to Mme. Bouchard, all in rather questionable taste. They said the sight of her made people's heads spin round more than her turntable did. What did one get out of that fine device? It wasn't a patch on forfeits. How they would like to play forfeits, with such nice things to win? Mme. Bouchard giggled like any silly young thing and lowered her lashes down over her pretty eyes. She began to sway to and fro on her hips, just like a peasant lass with the gentlemen after her, with Mme. Correur in the background going into raptures and repeating: "Isn't she delightful!"

However, in the end Mme. Bouchard was obliged to rap M. d'Escorailles' knuckles. He wanted to find out how the thing worked. He said there was some trickery inside it. "When were they going to leave her in peace," she demanded. And when she had at last got rid of them, she at last resumed her stall-girl's sing-song:

"Come along, gentlemen, twenty *sous* the go Do try a go gentlemen."

At that moment, standing up, to see over all the heads, M. Kahn suddenly plopped back into his chair, murmuring:

"Here's Rougon. . . . Let's pretend we didn't see him, eh?"

Rougon was slowly making his way down the main hall. Pausing, he had a go at Mme. Bouchard's tombola and he bought a rose from Mme. de Combetot for three *louis*. But when he has thus done his duty to the stalls, he was apparently proposing to leave at once. He drew aside from the crowd and was making for a door when, suddenly, happening to glance into the café, he made straight for this. He was holding his head very high. He was impassive, superb. M. d'Escorailles and M. La Rouquette had joined M. Kahn, M. Béjuin and the Colonel, and now M. Bouchard too had turned up. And when the Minister of the Interior passed by them, they all felt a thrill, he seemed so immense, so solid, so stoutly put together. Familiar and supercilious, he bade them good-day, and sat down at a table quite close to theirs. His broad countenance high, he gazed slowly first to one side, then to another, as if to challenge all those who were staring at him and without flinching face their eyes.

Now Clorinda came up to him, trailing her heavy yellow

silk gown behind her. Affecting a vulgarity which was faintly mocking, she asked him what she might bring him.

"Well, now, I wonder, what?" he replied, cheerfully. "I never really drink. . . . But what have you got?"

She ran swiftly through the liqueurs: a *fine champagne* brandy? Rum? Curaçao, kirsch, chartreuse, anisette, vespéto, kümmel?"

"No, no, er—just bring me a glass of sugar and water, please."

She went across to the bar and brought him his order, still with that grandeur of a goddess. And stayed at his table, watching him stir the lumps of sugar into the water. He was still smiling. Then he uttered the first idle things that came to his lips.

"And how are you? . . . It is an age since I saw you."

"I have been staying at Fontainebleau," she replied, without more ado.

He looked up and gravely examined her. But now she had a question to put:

"And you? Happy? Is everything going as you wish?"

"Absolutely," he replied.

"Well, now, isn't that fine."

And she busied herself about his table, like a proper waitress, that malevolent glow in her eyes all the time, as if at any moment she might explode her triumph on him. But at last she decided to leave him, and rose up on tip-toe, to glance into the main hall. Then, laying her fingers on his shoulder, her face suddenly lit up:

"I think somebody wants you," she said.

It was indeed Merle, respectfully weaving his way between chairs, tables and bar. Three times running he saluted. He begged His Excellency's pardon, but just after His Excellency left, a letter arrived. And His Excellency would not have got it till tomorrow morning. So, though he had had no instructions, he had thought. . . .

"Quite right," Rougon interrupted, "let me have it."

The commissioner handed him a large envelope, then went to wander through the bazaar. At a glance, Rougon had recognized the handwriting. It was addressed in the Emperor's own hand. It was the reply to his resignation. A cold dampness rose to his temples. But he did not change colour in the least. Calmly, he slipped the letter into the inner pocket of his frock

coat, all the time braving those eyes staring at him from M. Kahn's table, where Clorinda had gone for a moment, to exchange a few words. Now the whole troop of them eyed him. They did not let a single movement escape them. They were fevered with curiosity.

The young woman had come back and planted herself in front of him. At last, Rougon quaffed half his glass of sugar and water, then tried to find a gallant word.

"You are very lovely today. If queens were to turn waitresses."

She cut his compliment short and brazenly said:

"Why don't you read it?"

He pretended not to grasp what she meant. Then, seeming to remember, he said:

"Oh, my letter, you mean? All right, if it is your pleasure."

With the help of a knife he carefully slit open the envelope. One glance, and he had read the few lines. The Emperor accepted his resignation. For nearly a minute he held the sheet before him, as if re-reading it. He was afraid of losing control of his facial expression. There was a terrible heaving in his bowels, his great strength in revolt, refusing to accept his fall. This shook him to the marrow of his bones. Had he not strained every sinew, he might have cried out or smashed this table with his fists. Still staring at the letter, he again saw the Emperor as he had seen him at Saint Cloud, with that soft enunciation, that persistent smirk, repeating that he had confidence in Rougon and confirmed his former directives. What lengthy incubation of disfavour had there then been since then, behind that veiled expression, for this to break forth in one night, after keeping him in power a score of times?

At last, by a supreme effort, Rougon was again master of himself. He looked up. Not a quiver passed over his face. With utter indifference, he tucked the letter back into his pocket. But Clorinda had bent down. She had planted her hands on the table. The corners of her lips quivered. She it was gave way. She murmured:

"I knew all about it. . . . I only came away this morning. . . . My poor dear."

She commiserated, however, in such a spitefully mocking tone that he looked sharply up. They gazed rigidly into each other's eyes again. Not that she tried to dissimulate. She now had the satisfaction which she had waited for through many

long months. Now she could at leisure taste all the rapture of being able at last to reveal herself as an implacable enemy taking her revenge.

"I was unable to defend you," she said. "Probably you are not aware yet. . . ."

She did not even finish her sentence, but, suddenly strident, asked if he could guess who was taking his place.

He waved that aside. He did not care. But with her eyes she wore him down, then shot the words at him:

"My husband!"

Rougon's mouth was dry. He took another gulp of the sugared water. Into these two words she had put everything, her rage at having once been scorned by him, all her rancour, so artfully directed and all her feminine delight in the sheer feat of having defeated the man who was thought to be the strongest of them all. Having conquered, she could indulge in torturing him and taunting him with her triumph. She flaunted the wounding aspects of it. Heavens! Her husband was none of your superior beings, she admitted it, even joked about it. What she meant was that the first one at hand was satisfactory enough, she would have made Commissioner Merle into the Minister, had that been her whim. Yes, door-keeper Merle, or any nit-wit passer-by, no matter who, and Rougon would have had a fitting successor. All this was proof of the woman's supreme power. And then she went the whole hog, suddenly became maternal, protecting, purveyor of good advice.

"You see, my dear, as I so often told you, it's your great mistake to despise womankind. No, women are not nearly so silly as you think. It used to make me so wild to hear you treat us as so foolish things, troublesome necessities and what not, that fettered a man. . . . Look at my husband, now, have I fettered him? I just wanted to make you see that. I promised myself this little party, do you remember it, that day when we had a certain talk. Now you do know, don't you? No bitterness, mind. . . . You are very strong, my dear, but do get this into your head, a woman can always shift you if she only likes to take the trouble."

A trifle pale, Rougon smiled up at her.

"Well, perhaps you are right," he said, slowly, recalling the whole story. "I merely had my strength. You—you had. . . ."

"Damn it, I had a little something you haven't got!" she

concluded, with a bluntness which was almost great, so intensely did she scorn decency.

He made no complaint. She had drawn on his strength, to conquer him; she was now turning against him the lessons he had taught her the very ABC of, when she was the docile pupil, during those lovely afternoons in the *rue Marbeuf*. It was a compound of ingratitude and betrayal, the bitterness of which he now drained without any disgust. He had been through it all. His only concern in this final show-down was to discover if he really did know her. To his mind came his earlier attempts to find out, all those fruitless efforts to see through the secret gearing of this superb, unaccountable piece of machinery. Human stupidity, there was no doubt about it, was immense.

Twice Clorinda left him, to serve liqueurs, and when she had satisfied her need she resumed her regal promenade among her tables, pretending no longer to be concerned with him at all. He watched her. He then saw her go up to a man with a magnificently thick, full beard, an illustrious foreign visitor, whose prodigal spending was the talk of Paris. The personage in question had just finished a glass of *malaga*.

"How much, Madame?" he asked, rising from his chair.

"Five *francs*, Monsieur. All our drinks are five *francs*."

He paid. Then, in the same tone, Rougon heard the foreign accent ask:

"And what's the price of a kiss?"

"One hundred thousand, Monsieur," she replied, without hesitation.

The enquirer sat down, drew out a small book and scribbled a couple of words, then, handing her the cheque, planted a resounding kiss on her cheek and phlegmatically withdrew. There were smiles all round. Everybody thought it very fine.

"It's all a matter of price," murmured Clorinda, going back to Rougon's side.

In this he saw another allusion. To him she had said: never. And now this prudish man, who without flinching had accepted his fall, felt terribly hurt by that collar which she was wearing so brazenly. She bent lower down towards him, teasing him, making the little gold and pearl bell tinkle. There hung the chain. It might still have been warm from the hand of the master. The diamonds sparkled on the velvet, allowing him without difficulty to read the secret which everybody knew.

Never before had he felt such a stab of hidden jealousy, the smart of a haughty envy which he had on occasion experienced when he had the Emperor before him. He would rather Clorinda lay in the arms of that stable-boy people whispered about. The thought that she was now quite out of reach, at the very summit, slave of a man whose mere word made men bow their heads, stirred up all his old craving for her.

Unquestionably, the young woman guessed his agony. To it she added a cruel gesture: with half-closed eyes she indicated Mme. de Combelot, in her florist's cage, selling roses and with that malicious laugh she murmured:

"And look, there's poor Mme. de Combelot, still waiting!"

Rougon drained his sugar-water. He was choking. He took out his purse, and stammered:

"How much?"

"Five francs."

And when she had dropped the coin into her pouch, she held out her hand again and in a wheedling voice calmly said:

"No tip for the girl?"

He fumbled, drew out two sous, and dropped the coins into her palm. This was his blow, the only revenge that his coarse mind of a social climber could think of. Despite her *sang froid*, Clorinda turned scarlet. Then she had reassumed that goddess-like haughtiness. With a bow, she left him.

"Thank you, Your Excellency," she said.

Rougon could not face going immediately. His legs were limp, he was afraid of faltering, and he did want to withdraw as he had entered, massive and unruffled. He was principally afraid of passing by his former intimates, whose craning outstretched ears and staring eyes had not missed a single detail of what had passed. For several minutes longer he gazed about him, affecting indifference. He reflected. So another act of his political life was over. He was falling, undermined, corroded, demolished by his own gang. His powerful shoulders were giving way under the responsibilities and follies and shabby deeds which he had taken on himself, all out of his big man bombast, that need he had ever to be the generous but terrible big chief. His bull's sinews merely made his crash echo farther and the dispersal of his coterie farther-reaching. The very conditions of power, the need to have at one's back appetites to satisfy and to keep one's position by abuse of one's credit, had inevitably made his crash merely a matter of time.

Now he began to recall all that steady work the band had put in, and their sharp jaws, daily taking new toll of his strength. They were all round him. They clambered on to his lap, they reached up to his chest, to his throat, till they strangled him. They had taken possession of every part of him, using his feet to climb with, his hands to steal with, his jaws to tear and devour with. They lived in his flesh, drawing all their pleasure and their health from it, feasting by reason of it, without thought for the morrow. And now, having drained him, and begun to hear the very foundation of his creaking, they were slipping swiftly away from him like rats aware in advance of the coming collapse of the edifice that they have undermined. The whole band were well off, and flourishing. They were waxing fat on other flesh now. M. Kahn had just sold his Niort-Angers branch line to Count de Marsy. The Colonel last week had obtained an appointment in one of the imperial palaces. M. Bouchard had the formal assurance that his protégé, promising Georges Duchesne, would be appointed assistant-principal of the office, as soon as Delestang was appointed Minister of the Interior. Mme. Correux was happy to know that Mme. Martineau was very ill, so she was more or less installed herself in the Coulonges family house, to live on her income, like any good middle-class woman, doing good in the district. M. Béjuin was confident now that the Emperor would go to see his cut-glass works, in the early autumn. Finally, severely taken to task by his parents, M. d'Escorailles had knelt at Clorinda's feet and would be made assistant-prefect merely for having so admired her pouring out glasses of liqueur. And, compared with that collection of gorged creatures, Rougon himself was smaller than he had been before, so that now it was he who felt them to be huge, they crushed him and he was afraid to get up from his chair lest he stumbled and then saw them grin.

However, his head gradually cleared and he felt stronger, and got up. He was just pushing back the little zinc-topped table, to get through, when in came Delestang, on Count de Marsy's arm. A very strange story was being told of the latter. To believe certain whispers, he had joined Clorinda at Fontainebleau Castle earlier in the week merely to facilitate the young woman's clandestine meetings with the Emperor. Of course, spicy though it might be, this tale was no more than that. Men always render each other such little services.

But in it, Rougon scented de Marsy's revenge, working in connivance with Clorinda for his fall, turning against his successor at the Ministry of the Interior the very weapons used some months previously at Compiègne to unseat himself, though in a very clever way, and with a scurrility which verged on the elegant. And since they had returned from Fontainebleau, de Marsy and Delestang were inseparables.

M. Kahn, M. Béjuin, the Colonel, all of them, in fact, rushed to meet the new Minister. The nomination would not be published till tomorrow's *Moniteur*, beneath the announcement of Rougon's resignation, but the decree was signed, and they could celebrate. They shook hands vigorously, sniggering, whispering, in an expansion of enthusiasm which they scarcely tried to conceal from the watching eyes all round them. It was the steady assumption of possession by intimates who kiss feet and hands before making arms and legs their own. Indeed, Delestang already belonged to them. One held him by the right arm, another by the left, a third had seized a button of his frock coat, a fourth, behind his back, had reached up to whisper something in his ear. There he stood, rearing high that handsome head, with its affable dignity and that impressive appearance, at once so proper and so imbecile, of a monarch on an imperial tour, proffered bouquets by assistant police-chiefs' wives and seen in official photographs. This apotheosis of the mediocre drew Rougon's blood and left him very pale. All the same, as he thought back, he could not help smiling.

"I always did say that Delestang would go a long way," he said, with a deceptive smile, as Count de Marsy advanced, hand outstretched, to meet him.

The Count replied with a faint twist of his lips and disarming irony. Yes, since, first having rendered certain services to the wife, he had made Delestang his friend, Marsy must be getting quite a lot of amusement out of it. He engaged Rougon in conversation for a few moments and was exquisitely polite. In their never-ending combat, these two temperamental opposites, each in his own way a strong man, invariably exchanged bows as each stage of their duel ended. They were nicely matched, and invariably reserved the right to try again. Rougon had drawn Marsy's blood, Marsy had now drawn Rougon's, and so it would go on, till one of them failed to get up again. Perhaps at bottom neither really wanted the other's

death. The combat entertained them, their rivalry made life interesting for them. Besides, each in a hazy way felt he was a counterpoise essential to the stability of the Empire, one the hairy fist that brained an adversary, the other the subtle, gloved hand which could strangle.

While this was going on, Delestang was terribly embarrassed. Seeing Rougon, he simply did not know whether to offer him his hand or not. He glanced perplexedly at his wife, but her job as waitress seemed to be absorbing her attention, and with utter indifference she went on carrying about her sandwiches and *babas* and *brioches*. Then she did catch his eye and he thought he understood, so at last, blushing a little and apologizing, he did go up to Rougon.

"My friend you are not really angry with me? . . . I did not want it! . . . They pressed it on me. . . . After all, one has to give way sometimes. . . ."

Rougon cut him short. The Emperor, he said, had acted from wisdom. The country was going to be in excellent hands. This made Delestang pluck up courage.

"Not that I did not stick up for you," he said. "We all did. But the fact is, latterly, between you and me, you did go a little far. . . . People were particularly touchy about your last effort on behalf of the Charbonnells, you know, those poor *Sisters of Mercy*. . . ."

Count de Marsy repressed a smile. With all the generosity of his younger days, Rougon replied:

"Of course, I know what you mean, that domiciliary search of the Convent. . . . Good gracious me, among all the silly things my friends made me do, that may have been the only sensible and just one that I was responsible for in all my five months in office."

He was just leaving, when he saw Du Poizat enter and take possession of Delestang. The Prefect had pretended not to see him. He had been in Paris for three days, lying low, waiting. He must have met his transfer to another prefecture, for he now fell over himself with thanks and that toothy, vulpine grin of his. Then, turning round, the new Minister almost embraced Merle the commissioner, whom Mme. Correur had thrust forward. There the commissioner stood, just like a shy schoolgirl, while Mme. Correur sang his praises.

"Somebody in the Ministry has his knife in him," she murmured, "all because by his silence he protested against

certain abuses. He saw some funny doings, I can tell you, while Rougon was in office."

"Too true," said Merle, "very rum things, Your Excellency, I could tell a thing or two. . . . I don't think anybody is going to sigh after M. Rougon. I certainly paid for being his supporter, at first. He all but turned me out."

In the main hall, which Rougon passed through very slowly, the stalls were bare now. To please the Empress, as patron of this effort, the visitors had sacked everything. The ladies were so pleased that they were talking of re-opening in the evening with new stock. They were counting out their takings. Figures were announced, amid triumphant laughter. One had made three thousand *francs*, another four thousand, five hundred, a third seven thousand, yet another—ten thousand. She was radiant. A woman who had made ten thousand *francs*!

Nevertheless, Mme. de Combelot was most unhappy. She had just got rid of her last rose, and still there were clients round her kiosk. She emerged, to ask Mme. Bouchard if she had anything left. But no, her *tombola* too was bare. A lady was just bearing away the last prize, a toy doll's basin. But they had a good look and finally contrived to discover one packet of tooth-picks, fallen on the ground, and this Mme. de Combelot bore off triumphantly, followed by Mme. Bouchard. They climbed into the kiosk together.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" cried the first, brazen as she towered there and with sweeping gestures with her bare arms collected the men about her. "This is all we have left, one packet of tooth-picks. . . . Twenty-five tooth-picks. . . . I am going to auction them. . . ."

The men jostled, laughing, holding out their gloved hands. Mme. Combelot's idea was going to be a great success.

"A tooth-pick," she cried. "I am started at five *francs*. . . . I am offered five *francs* for a tooth-pick. . . ."

"Ten *francs*," came a voice.

"Twelve."

"Fifteen."

M. d'Escorailles having jumped suddenly to twenty-five *francs*, Mme. Bouchard rushed it and the hammer fell to him.

The other tooth-picks went much higher. M. La Rouquette paid forty-three *francs* for his. Rusconi, who had just come in, soared up to seventy-two. Finally, the last one of all, a very thin little sliver, which, not to deceive anybody, Mme. de

Combelot declared was split, was knocked down for the sum of one hundred and seventeen *francs* to an elderly gentleman who got very worked up by the young woman's enthusiasm and her bodice gaping wide at every one of her passionate auctioneer's gestures.

"It is split, gentlemen, but still it will do. . . . Going at one hundred and eighty. . . . One hundred and ten, over there . . . and . . . eleven . . . twelve . . . one hundred and twelve, one hundred and fourteen, going at one hundred and fourteen, really worth far more than that, one hundred—and—seventeen, will nobody give more than one hundred and seventeen, going at one hundred and seventeen . . . going . . . gone!"

Thus, pursued by these figures, Rougon left the bazaar. Out on the terrace, by the water's edge, he slackened his pace. On the skyline, a storm was rising, getting up, gathering. Below him flowed the Seine, an oily, dirty green floor, sluggish between the hazy embankments with their clouds of dust. In the gardens the freshing hot wind shook the trees in gusts, then the branches drooped again and the lifeless leaves hung limp. He followed the alley under the huge crests of the chestnuts. It was almost pitch dark here. A damp heat rose as from a cellar.

He had reached the junction with the main avenue when whom should he see, stolidly seated on a bench, but the Charbonnels. They were quite splendid, a transformed couple. M. Charbonnel was dressed in pale grey trousers and a tight waisted frock coat, and his wife was wearing a hat gay with red flowers and a light mantle over a mauve silk gown. Beside them, straddling the bench at one end, was a ragged individual in a frightful old hunting jacket. He was without underlinen. He was waving his arms and hitching towards them, with frequent taps on his canvas cap, which slipped off his head. It was Gilquin.

"A pack of rogues!" he cried. "Did Theodore ever try to cheat anybody of a penny? And then go and invent a yarn about avoiding military service just to put me in the wrong. But I pretty soon put them right, understand. Let them go to Hell. Eh? I tell you, they're a bit afraid of me, they are, they know my politics all right, I was never in Badinguet's clique. . . ."

Leaning towards them, and rolling lugubrious eyes at them, he added:

"There's only one person down there I regret. . . . And oh, she was adorable, I do assure you, a society lady too, yes, a very nice little person, she was. . . . Fair-haired, she was. I've a lock of her hair. . . ."

Then he assumed a sonorous voice. Close up to Mme. Charbonnel, he tapped her on the stomach.

"Well, Mum?" he cried, "and when are you taking me down to Plassans, as you promised, remember, to eat up all that jam and your apples and cherries and sugar-plums, eh? We're out of office now, you know."

But the Charbonnells seemed to be rather embarrassed by Gilquin's familiarity. Mme. Charbonnel drew her silk gown away from him and ground out between clenched teeth:

"We are going to stay some time in Paris. . . . We may spend six months here every year."

"Ah, Paris!" said the husband, with profound admiration in his voice. "There's nothing like Paris!"

And when the gusts of wind became much more violent and a whole troop of nursemaids and children went scurrying past, he turned to his wife and said:

"My sweet, we would do well to go in, if we don't want a soaking. Luckily we've only a few yards to go."

They had put up at the Palais-Royal Hotel, in the *rue de Rivoli*. Gilquin sat gazing at their receding figures, then shrugged his shoulders with profound scorn.

"More faithless friends. Faithless, all of them."

Suddenly, he saw it was Rougon there. He stood swaying to and fro, waiting for him to come up, gave his cap a bang, and said:

"I've never been round to see you. But you weren't offended, I hope. . . . That bounder Du Poizat no doubt had his say about me. Lies, old boy, I can prove it to you whenever you like. . . . Anyway, I'm not offended with you. . . . Here's the proof, I'll give you my address: 25, *rue du Bon-Puits, la Chapelle* district, you know, five minutes walk from the city walls. There you are, so if you ever do want to get in touch with me, you need only wink."

He made off, dragging his feet. He halted for a moment, as if to get his bearings. Then, shaking his fist at the Tuileries Palace, at the far end of the avenue, leaden grey in the lurid light of the approaching storm, he suddenly shouted:

"Long live the Republic!"

Rougon left the gardens and walked down the *Champs-Élysées*. He had had a sudden impulse. He must go and have a look at his little house in the *rue Marbeuf*, without delay. Tomorrow morning he would move out of the ministerial quarters and resume life there. He felt that his brain was wearied, but he was also aware of immense calm, though with a dull pain deep down. He thought of hazy things. Some day, to show how strong he was, he would do big things. Every now and then he peered up at the sky. The storm could not bring itself to break. Ruddy clouds barred the horizon. Tremendous claps of thunder reverberated down the *Champs-Élysées*. The avenue was deserted. The thunder was like the din of batteries of cannon at the gallop. A shiver ran through the tree-tops. The first drops of rain fell just as he was turning into the *rue Marbeuf*.

He found a cab halted outside his house, and when he went in, there was his wife, looking it over too, measuring windows, giving instructions to an upholstering firm. He was amazed, till she explained that she had just seen her brother, M. Beulind'Orchère, the judge, who already knew about Rougon's fall. He had meant to crush his sister, telling her that now he would soon be Minister of Justice. Perhaps he could at last make trouble between husband and wife. But all Mme. Rougon had done was send for her carriage, to have a look at their *rue Marbeuf* home, without delay. She still had that grey, composed expression of the religious woman that she was and that invincible calm of the good housekeeper. Silently, she went from room to room, reassuming possession of this house which she had made as silent and as soothing as a convent. Her only thought was to be the good steward and manage well this new turn of fortune which fell to her lot. Seeing her dry, narrow face and the signs of all her passion for order, Rougon was very moved.

By now the storm had broken, with incredible violence, with heavy thunder and torrents of rain. He was obliged to wait three-quarters of an hour. His wife had left. It was his intention to walk back. The *Champs-Élysées* were now a swamp of mud, yellow, liquid mud, stretching from the *Arc de Triomphe* to the *Place de la Concorde* as if the river bed of a river suddenly drained of water. The avenue was deserted, and there were only rare foot-passengers seeking stones on which to step across the puddles. The trees were streaming with water and dripping

heavily in the still, fresh night air. In the heavens the storm had left behind it a trail of tattered, coppery cloud, a low-hanging, dirty mass shedding the remnants of a gloomy day, a cut-throat, sinister light.

Rougon had resumed his hazy reverie about the future. Stray drops of rain fell on his hands. He was more conscious now of tension in his whole being, as if he had come up against an obstacle that barred his road. All at once he heard a great clatter of hoofs behind him, a rhythmic tattoo which shook the ground, and he looked behind him.

In the wretched light of that copper-coloured sky, a procession was approaching through the slush of the high road, a cavalcade on the way back from the *Bois*, the bright uniforms glinting in the sunken dark depths of the great park. At the head cantered advance bodies of dragoons. Then came a closed landau, drawn by four horses. At the doors were grooms in full gold-embroidered livery, impassive as the slush splattered them. They were already completely stuccoed with the sticky yellow liquid, from their jackboots with turn-down tops to their helmets with their waterproof covers. And in the darkness of the closed landau he distinguished a child. It was the Prince Imperial, his pink nose pressed to the plate-glass window, his ten little fingers spread out on the pane.

"*Pouah!*" cried a road-sweeper, pushing a truck, "*pouah!*" The man grinned. "That toad!" he added.

Rougon halted for a moment, lost in thought, then followed on, after the cavalcade, as it made off through the slush, the horses' hoofs splashing even the lower leaves of the trees.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ONE March day, three years later, there was a very stormy sitting of the Legislative Assembly. For the first time, the address from the throne was to be critically debated.

In the bar, M. La Rouquette and an elderly deputy, a M. de Lamberthon, husband of a delightful wife, were sitting facing one another over a quiet glass of spirits.

"Well, supposing we go back to the Chamber?" said M. de Lamberthon, who had been listening. "I think things are warming up."

The distant hubbub reached them in gusts. A storm of voices would blow up like a sudden squall, then silence would be resumed. But M. La Rouquette went on smoking, with an air of complete indifference.

"No," he said, "let 'em carry on, I want to finish my cigar. . . . They'll let us know if we are really needed. I left word to that effect."

They were alone in the bar, a little, very smart place at the far end of the narrow garden which forms the corner of the *Quai de Bourgogne* and the street of the same name. Done out in a soft shade of green, with bamboo trellis-work, and large glazed bays opening on to stretches of garden, it was like a greenhouse transformed into a smart bar, with panellings of mirrors, separate little tables, and a red marble bar, all the seating upholstered in green cord. Through one of the windows, which was open, filtered an exquisite afternoon, with springtime warmth, made invigorating by a brisk breeze blowing up off the river.

"The Italian war crowned his glory," M. La Rouquette resumed where he had left off. "Today, by giving the country its liberty, he has shown all the strength of his genius. . . ."

He was referring to the Emperor. He dwelt for a moment on the grandeur of the November decrees and the more direct part played by the great bodies of state in the sovereign's policy, since the institution of "ministers without portfolio" charged to represent the régime in the two chambers. It was

a return to a constitutional system—or rather, to what was healthy and sensible in that system. A new era, that of the liberal empire, was beginning. Carried away by admiration, he shook off his cigar ash.

M. de Lamberthon, however, tossed his head back. He was more cautious.

"He has been a little hasty," he murmured. "One could have waited a little longer for this. There was no hurry."

"Oh yes, there was," said the young deputy, quickly. "Something simply had to be done at once. Therein resides his brilliance. . . ."

With significant glances, lowering his voice, he explained the political situation. The pronouncements made by the bishops on the question of temporal power, which the Turin Government threatened, had worried the Emperor very much. At the same time, the opposition was waking up and the country was entering a period of unrest. This was precisely the moment to attempt to reconcile the two factions and, by making them wise concessions, to attract the allegiance of those politicians who were dissatisfied. Now the Emperor was finding the authoritarian Empire very sadly lacking, so he was making a liberal empire the apotheosis which was to shed its light over the whole of Europe.

"No matter, he has acted too hastily," M. de Lamberthon repeated, still shaking his head. "I fully understand what you mean about a liberal empire. But, my dear sir, it is an unknown quantity, an unknown, an unknown. . . ."

He waved his hand before his face, as if in absolute vacancy, and repeated the word "unknown" in three different tones. M. La Rouquette said no more. He was finishing his glass. The two deputies then sat on dreamy-eyed, staring through the open window into the sky, as if both trying to detect that unknown, somewhere beyond the embankment, over towards the Tuileries palace, in the banks of mist which were hovering there. At their backs, at the far end of the corridors, the tempest of voices began to rise in volume again, like the dull mutter of an approaching storm.

M. de Lamberthon looked round. He was feeling very uneasy. After a silence, he asked:

"It's Rougon who is to reply, isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe it is," replied M. La Rouquette, tight-lipped and cautious.

"Rougon has a very compromising record," the elderly deputy began again. "It was a most peculiar choice of the Emperor's, making him minister without portfolio and charging him with defence of the new policy."

For the moment, M. La Rouquette was expressing no opinion. With slow fingers, he fondled his fair moustaches. At last he said:

"The Emperor knows his Rougon." Then, in a changed voice, he protested: "Rather poor grog they serve here, don't you think? I am frightfully thirsty. I think I'll have a soft drink now."

He ordered his soft drink. M. de Lamberthon hesitated, then at last decided that his choice would be a glass of madeira. And they talked again of Mme. de Lamberthon. The husband reproached his young colleague with being such a rare visitor. M. La Rouquette snuggled back deep into the soft seat and with sidelong glances began to admire himself in the mirrors. He rather liked the soft green walls of this bright little bar. It was not unlike a Pompadour summer-house planted where the rides of a princely forest met, and intended for amorous meetings.

An usher suddenly broke breathless into the bar.

"M. La Rouquette, they want you at once, sir, at once!"

And when the young deputy waved his hand with utter boredom, the usher bent down to his ear and whispered that it was the President of the Chamber, Count de Marsy himself, who had sent for him. In a louder voice he added:

"As far as that goes, sir, everybody is wanted in the Chamber, sir. Without delay."

M. de Lamberthon had already rushed off. M. La Rouquette began to follow him, then thought better of it. It occurred to him to rally all other idling deputies, and getting them to their places. First he rushed off to the Conference Hall, a lovely apartment with a glazed ceiling to light it and an enormous green marble fireplace with two naked females in white marble prostrate on either side. Despite the mildness of the afternoon, huge logs were blazing in the hearth. At the enormous table, eyes open, staring at the wall paintings and the famous clock which only needed winding once a year, three deputies were dozing. Standing back to the fire, a fourth was warming his loins, and seemed to be most affectionately examining a tiny plaster statue of Henri IV which stood out from a display of

flags captured at Marengo, Austerlitz and Jena. At the cry of their colleague who was now running from one to another, telling them excitedly to hurry to the Chamber, they one by one, seemed to jerk suddenly into life, and made off.

In his enthusiasm, M. La Rouquette now went all the way to the library, on his way remembering to peep down the corridor leading to the cloak room, there to find M. de Combelot, his hands deep in a basin of water, meticulously rubbing away at his hands and smiling at their whiteness. M. de Combelot was not going to be stampeded. He at once turned back to his preoccupation, rinsing and wiping his hands at great length with a towel dipped in warm water, which he then returned to the drying cabinet with its brass doors. He even found time to step across to the cheval glass and comb out his fine black beard with a little pocket comb.

The Library was empty. The books were all sound asleep in their oaken bunks. Not a scrap of paper sullied the stern expanses of green baize of the two big tables there. The book-stands on the arms of the armchairs were all neatly tucked back at the same angle. There was a faint bloom of dust on them all. And M. La Rouquette suddenly banged the door and broke the profound meditation of the place in the gallery, with its odour of paper. "There never is anybody in this place!" he cried.

From the Library he rushed off through a sequence of corridors and rooms, to the distribution hall, with its floor of Pyrenean marble, where his footsteps rang as if in a church. Here an usher intimated that a deputy who was a friend of his, M. de la Villardière, was just showing a lady and gentleman round, and he was persistent enough to go in search of him. He rushed to the *General Foy* room, the four statues of which stern antechamber, representing Mirabeau, General Foy, Pailly and Casimir Périer, invariably excite the awed admiration of the provincial bourgeoisie, but it was in another room, the throne room, in fact, that he did at last discover M. de la Villardière, on one side of him a corpulent lady, on the other a corpulent gentleman, both from Dijon, both lawyers and both influential voters of his.

"You're wanted!" cried M. La Rouquette. "You won't be long getting back to your post, will you?"

"Certainly, I'll come at once," replied the deputy.

But he could not get away immediately. Quite impressed

by the luxuriousness of this room, the great panels of mirror, the gilded mouldings, the bulky visitor had removed his hat and was not going to let his "dear deputy" go so easily. He wanted explanations about the Delacroix paintings—the seas and rivers of France—and the towering decorative figures—*Mediterraneum Mare, Oceanus, Ligeris, Rhenis, Sequana, Rhodanus, Garumna, Araris*. This display of Latin fogged him.

"*Ligeris*, that's the Loire," said M. de la Vallardière.

The Dijon lawyer nodded emphatically. Yes, he grasped that. But now his good wife was admiring the throne, an armchair rather higher up than the others, enveloped in a dust-sheet. It was raised up on a broad platform. She stood well back from it. She was most moved. She seemed to worship it. At last, steeling herself, she went up to it. Cautiously, she took hold of the dust-cover and raised it a little, to touch the gilded woodwork and feel the red plush seat.

By now M. La Rouquette was beating the right wing of the Palace, with its endless corridors and rooms reserved for offices and administrative purposes and committees. This brought him back to the Hall of the Four Columns, where young deputies gaze at the statues of Brutus, Solon and Lycurgus and dream. He nipped across the Hall of the Lost Steps. He scurried round the semi-circular Outer Gallery, just like a squashed cloister. With its gas-jets burning day and night, it had all the bare dimness of a church. And then, quite breathless, at the head of a little bevy of deputies whom he had raked up in this general beat, he flung wide a mahogany door starred with gilt. Behind him came M. de Combelot, his hands white, his beard perfectly combed. M. de la Villardière, who has at last got rid of his two supporters, followed on his heels. They all hurried up the stairs and into the Chamber where all the deputies were on their feet, in great turmoil waving their arms, threatening an imperturbable orator at the tribune, shouting:

"Order, order, order!"

"Order, order, order!" cried M. La Rouquette and his friends, in even louder voices, though they had not the foggiest notion what had happened.

There was a terrible din, with deputies stamping their feet and making a thunderous noise with the lids of their desks. Shrill voices rang strident as fifes through the medley of the other shouting, which rumbled like the vibration of deep

organ notes. Every now and then the shouting seemed to be broken for a moment, and into such cracks in the dying clamour came precise cries, jeering and protests.

"Outrageous! Intolerable!"

"He ought to withdraw!"

"Yes, withdraw, withdraw!"

But the most persistent cries, those which never ceased, but became a rhythmic beat matching the stamping feet, were that one repeated word: "Order, order, order!" shouted till their straining voices broke.

At the tribune, the speaker had folded his arms. He was gazing before him at this infuriated assembly, all those barking physiognomies, all those brandished fists. Twice, thinking it would die down for a moment, he opened his mouth to speak, but that only led to a renewal of the storm, a wave of absolute fury. The Chamber rang with their shouts.

Count de Marsy was on his feet in front of the presidential chair, his hand on the bell push, ringing continuously. It was like the ringing of church bells to calm a tempest. His pale, elongated face maintained perfect calm. He paused for a moment in his ringing and quietly straightened his shirt-cuffs, then began the jangle again. That faint, sceptical grin which was almost his normal expression, a permanent nervous reflex, twisted his thin lips. Whenever the voices died down, he did no more than try to reason:

"Gentlemen, please, gentlemen. . . ." At last, however, he did secure relative quiet. Then he gave his ruling: "I call upon the speaker to explain his words."

The speaker leant forward, his hands on the edge of the lectern, and, stubbornly emphasizing every syllable with little jerks of his chin, he repeated what he had said:

"I declared that the act of December 2nd was a crime!"

He was not able to say another word. The storm began again. Scarlet-checked, one deputy shouted that he was an assassin. Another suddenly yelled so coarse an insult that the shorthand-writers grinned, but did not write it down. But one voice did make itself heard. This was the fluted larynx of M. La Rouquette, who was repeating:

"He insults the Emperor, he insults France!"

With a dignified gesture, Count de Marsy sat down again.

"I call the speaker to order," he said.

After this, there was a lengthy disturbance. This was no

longer that drowsy Chamber which five years previously had voted four hundred thousand francs for the christening of the Prince Imperial. On the left there were four deputies standing on their desks, applauding the attack their colleague had just made. Now there were five attacking the Empire. By their persistent blows, by continuing to speak against it, by refusing it their vote with protesting stubbornness, they were indeed beginning to shake it, and their efforts were gradually to stir up the whole country. A tiny little group, they stood their ground, although they seemed lost under that crushing majority. To all the threats, and brandished fists, to this noisy pressure of the Chamber, they replied without a hint of dismay, fervent and rigid in their revulsion.

The Chamber itself seemed to have changed. It had become resonant, it vibrated with delirium. The tribune, a special stand and lectern from which all speeches were made, had been re-introduced, and those chilly masses of marble, that would-be imposing semi-circle of stone columns, were now warmed by the burning words of speaker after speaker. The light which poured in through the great glazed apse now seemed to start up heath fires here and there along the ranks of red velvet seating, on these stormy days of general debate. The monumental presidential desk, with its frigid panelling, was now enlivened by Count de Marsy's sarcasm and irony, that very proper frock coat of his close buttoned to the shrunken body of a worn-out debauchee, now marking a wretched silhouette out from the Olympian nudities of the marble *bas-relief* at his back. Now only the allegorical figures of Public Order and Liberty, between their pairs of columns in the recesses, were calm; they maintained the same dead countenances and vacant eyes of limestone divinities that they had had before. What however most of all now brought the breath of life into the Chamber was the increased number of members of the public. They it was who, leaning forward and closely following every word, introduced real feeling to the place. The second tier of seats had been restored. The press now had its own benches, and at the very summit, level with the cornice with its gilded ornament, there were craning heads. The populace had entered the Chamber, and sometimes the deputies would glance a little uneasily upwards, as if they had suddenly thought they heard the tread of roiting crowd.

The speaker at the tribune was still waiting to be able to

go on. Drowned by the still unceasing mutter of voices, he began:

"Gentlemen, I will now continue. . . ." Then he broke off, to cry, in much louder tones, which suddenly dominated the din: "If the Chamber will not let me speak, I shall enter a protest and leave the tribune!"

"Speak up then!" came cries from a number of benches, and one voice, thick, as though the deputy's throat had rusted up, ground out:

"Have your say, you'll get your answer!"

All at once, there was utter silence. From the tiers of seats and the public galleries heads craned forward to see Rougon, for it was he who had uttered these last words. He was on the front bench, his elbows propped on the marble desk-top. Bent forward, his huge back was motionless, save for an occasional slight swaying of the shoulders. His face could not be seen at all. It was buried in those huge fists of his. He was listening. His entry into the debate was awaited with lively curiosity, for this would be the first time that he spoke as Minister without Portfolio. No doubt he was fully aware of all those eyes fastened on him. Suddenly, he looked back and swept the Chamber with a single glance. Opposite him, in the section of the public gallery reserved for ministers, he saw Clorinda, in a violet-coloured gown, her elbows on the red velvet-covered bar in front of her. With that unperturbed effrontery of hers, she stared down, straight into his eyes. For a couple of seconds they held each other's glance, without the hint of a smile, as if strangers. Then Rougon turned back and went on listening, his face buried in his open hands.

"Gentlemen, then I continue," said the speaker. "The November Decree hands out freedoms which are purely illusory. We are still very far from the principles of 1789 which were with such emphasis made the foundation of the constitution of the empire. If the régime continues to be armed with exceptional laws, if it is still to impose its orders on the country, if it does not free the press from arbitrary rule, in short, if it still keeps France at its mercy, whatever apparent concessions it may make are false concessions. . . ."

The President interrupted.

"I cannot permit the speaker the use of such language."

"Hear, hear!" came from the right.

The speaker withdrew his words, toned them down, and

from now on made an effort to be very moderate, producing fine phrases, very pure in style, all long periods with a solemn fall at the end. Nevertheless, Count de Marsy now became ruthless. He challenged every expression used. The speaker then went off into lofty argumentation, with vague wording and many long words, in which any thought was so well wrapped up that the President was obliged to let him have his say. After which, all at once, back he was where he had begun.

"Further," he cried, "my friends and I will not vote for the first paragraph of the address in response to the speech from the Throne. . . ."

"The Chamber can do without you!" came a voice.

A wave of laughter ran through the ranks of deputies.

"We shall not vote for the first paragraph of the address," the speaker calmly began again, "unless our amendment is adopted. We cannot associate ourselves to exaggerated expression of gratitude where the thought of the head of state seems to be full of restrictions. Liberty is indivisible; it cannot be chopped into pieces and rationed out, like charity."

At this, there were lively protests from all over the assembly.

"Your liberty would be licence!"

"Don't speak of charity when you are begging for unhealthy popularity!"

"You would chop heads off!" cried another.

"Our amendment," the speaker continued, as if he had not heard this heckling, "calls for the abrogation of the law of general security, for the freedom of the press, for honest elections. . . ."

The laughter resumed. Loud enough to be heard by his neighbours, a deputy had cried: "Bah! my dear man, you'll get none of that!" Another was jerking out a wry rejoinder to every single phrase spoken by the speaker. Most of the deputies, however, were finding entertainment merely in beating an accompaniment to the speaker's words, hammering with their paper-knives on their desks. It was like the roll of massed side-drums, and it drowned the speaker altogether. Nevertheless, he struggled on to the end. Rearing himself to his full height, he bellowed these final words above the tumult:

"Yes, we are revolutionaries, if by revolutionaries you mean men of progress, determined to win back liberty! Refuse the people liberty, and one day they will take it back for themselves."

With this, he left the tribune, amid a new hullabaloo. The deputies were no longer laughing like a band of schoolboys freshly out to play. They had risen to their feet, turned to the left of the Chamber. Once again begun their chant of "Order, order!" Back at his place, the speaker was still standing, his friends round him. There was much jostling. The majority seemed about to fling themselves on these five. Pale-faced, they stood their ground defiantly. Count de Marsy, however, was angry. He rang his bell furiously, and seemed alarmed. Glancing up at the public gallery, where ladies were beginning to shrink back, he cried:

"Gentlemen, this is an outrage!"

When silence was at last restored, he continued:

"I do not intend to issue a second appeal for order. I will content myself with declaring that it is indeed scandalous to threaten this tribune in a way which dishonours it!"

A triple wave of applause welcomed these words of the President of the Chamber. There were cries of *Bravo!* and renewed drumming with paper-knives, this time as a mark of approval. The speaker on the left would have replied, but his friends prevented him from doing so. The tumult began to die down, in a mutter of many individual conversations.

"I now call upon His Excellency Monsieur Rougon to speak," said the President, more quietly.

A shiver ran through the Chamber, a sigh of satisfied curiosity, now giving place to reverent expectation. Round-shouldered, Rougon ponderously climbed on to the tribune. For a moment he did not look at the Chamber at all. He planted a sheaf of notes in front of him. He moved the glass of sugared water back and drew his hands across the lectern, as if taking possession of that little mahogany pulpit. Only then, leaning his back against the Presidential desk above him, did he look up. He did not seem to age at all. There was still the fresh complexion of a small town lawyer on his face, a pinkish pallor about his square forehead, with the large, shapely nose, and the elongated cheeks, on which there was not a wrinkle. The only hint of age was that the grizzled hair, which grew coarse and bristly, and was beginning to be a little thin at the temples, revealing his large ears. With half-closed eyes he cast a glance at the assembly, which was still waiting. For a moment he seemed to be looking for somebody. Then again his eyes lit on Clorinda's, as, all attention, she leant

forward. Then only did he begin, in that heavy, thick voice of his.

"We too are revolutionaries, if by the word you mean men of progress, men resolved to restore to this country, one by one, all the judicious freedoms. . . ."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes, gentlemen! What régime better than the Empire ever brought into being such liberal reforms, the entrancing programme of which you have just heard in outline? I do not intend to attempt to reply in detail to the speech of the honoured member who preceded me. I shall be satisfied to prove that the genius and the generous heart of the Emperor have outstripped all that the most rabid opponents of his régime demand. Yes, gentlemen, it is the Emperor himself who is handing back to the nation the very powers with which it invested him on a day of danger to the whole community. A magnificent spectacle, rare in history! Of course we fully understand what rancour this has prompted among certain elements of disorder. It reduces them to the position of assailing the purpose of the proposals and questioning the amount of liberty restored. . . . The great act of November 24th has enjoyed your understanding. In the first paragraph of the address it was your desire to indicate to His Majesty your profound gratitude for his magnanimity and confidence in the wisdom of the Legislative Body. To adopt the amendment before you, would be to offer a gratuitous insult, I would even call it an evil act. Gentlemen, consult your own consciences and ask yourselves if you feel free or not. Liberty today is complete and full, I am myself the guarantee of that. . . ."

Prolonged applause interrupted him here. He had gradually moved to the front of the tribune. Now, right arm extended, leaning forward a trifle, he raised his voice, and it rang out with astonishing power. Behind him Count de Marsy lolled back in the presidential chair, listening, on his countenance a trace of the smile of a connoisseur astonished by the masterly accomplishment of a *tour de force*. All over the Chamber, which was still thundering with *bravos*, deputies leant towards one another, whispering in astonishment and pursing their lips in wonder. Clorinda's arms hung limp on the plush-drawn bar in front of her. She was completely absorbed.

Rougon continued:

"Today, the hour which we have all been awaiting with

such impatience has at last struck. There is no longer any danger in transforming a prosperous France into a free France. The cravings of anarchy are dead. The sovereign's vigour, and the solemn will of the country in alliance have for all time thrust back far beyond our frontiers those frightful hours of wrong-thinking of the nation. Freedom became feasible the moment that faction which insisted on refusing to recognize the fundamental foundation of ordered society was mastered. This is why the Emperor has considered it possible to withdraw his powerful hand and reject any excessive prerogative of power as a profitless burden. He now holds his rule to be so indisputable that none can question it. Nor has he shrunk from the notion of putting complete trust in the future. He will go to the very end with his work of liberation, restoring the freedoms one by one, in stages which his wisdom will determine. From now on, that is the programme of uninterrupted advancement which it is our task to defend in this assembly. . . ."

Indignant, one of the five deputies of the left rose.

"You yourself," he cried, "were the Minister of absolute repression!"

And another cried passionately:

"Those who supplied Cayenne and Lambasa with human victims have no right to speak in the name of liberty!"

A burst of expostulation arose. Quite a number of deputies were leaning forward, asking their neighbours, not having caught what was said. Count de Marsy pretended not to have heard at all. He merely threatened to call any interrupters to order.

"I have just been reproached . . ." Rougon went on.

But now there were shouts from the right, which made it impossible to go on.

"No, no, don't answer!"

"You needn't take notice of such insults!"

With a single gesture he calmed the Chamber. Resting his two fists on the edge of the lectern, he swung round to the left, like a stag at bay.

"I shall not attempt to answer that," he said, calmly.

This was merely an introductory phrase, for although he had said he would not answer what had been said by the deputy of the left, he now proceeded to pull it to pieces in detail. First, he outlined his adversary's own arguments. He instilled

this operation with a sort of playfulness, an impartiality which had a tremendous effect, as if he was utterly scornful of all those fine arguments and ready to reduce them to nothing with one puff. Next, he seemed to forget to deal with them at all. He did not reply to one single point. Then, suddenly, he assailed the weakest argument of all with unheard-of violence, in a flood of eloquence which completely demolished it. There was great applause, and he revelled in it. His ponderous body filled the whole tribune. His shoulders swayed rhythmically, as his periods rose and fell. He made use of commonplace rhetoric, full of errors, bristling with questionable law, exaggerating commonplaces, then, utterly destroying the opposition with his dynamite charges, thundering away and making much of empty words. The only thing in which as orator he was superior to all others was his breath. He had an immense sweep of eloquence. He was tireless. He could keep a sentence in the air endlessly, magnificently, sweeping all else pell-mell before it.

When he had been speaking without interruption for a whole hour, he swallowed a draught of water and took breath, putting the notes before him in order.

"Take a rest!" suggested a number of deputies.

But he did not feel fatigue at all. He wanted to bring the speech to its conclusion.

"What are they asking of you, gentlemen?"

There were cries from the benches to pay attention, and all faces were turned in tense expectation towards Rougon. There were moments when his voice rang so that a wave of emotion swept through the Chamber, like a strong gust of wind.

"They are asking you to abrogate the law of general security. I am not going to remind you of the ever accursed moment when that law became an essential weapon. The country then had to be given a guarantee. France had to be saved from a new cataclysm. Today, that weapon rests in its scabbard. The régime, which never did make use of it but with the greatest moderation. . . ."

"How true!"

"The régime, I say, no longer makes any use of it, except in most exceptional circumstances. That weapon hinders nobody, unless it is the members of those cliques who still cherish the criminal folly of wishing to see the worst days of our national history back again. Go through our cities, go

through our countryside, and everywhere you will see peace and prosperity. Ask orderly folk and you will find that there is not one who feels heavy on his shoulder these extraordinary laws with which we are charged, as if they were a crime. I repeat, in the paternal hands of the régime those laws remain as a safeguard of our community against hateful enterprise, though it is from now on impossible for such attempts ever again to succeed. Decent folk need never bother their heads about the existence of those safeguards. Let us leave those instruments where they now lie, till such day as the Sovereign himself thinks they may be done away with. . . . And what else is it they ask, gentlemen? Honest elections, freedom of the press, all manner of freedoms. Oh, do let me pause for a moment and survey the great achievements of the Empire which we already enjoy. Round me, wherever I look, I see the public freedoms growing and giving magnificent fruit. My emotions are profound, France had been brought very low, but France is now rising high, offering the world the example of a people winning their emancipation by their good behaviour. The days of trial are now behind us. It is no longer a question of dictatorship, of authoritarian government. We are all the builders of liberty. . . .”

“Bravo, bravo.”

“They call for honest elections. But is it not universal suffrage applied on the broadest possible foundation the primal condition of the very existence of the Empire? Admittedly, the régime puts forward its own candidates. But does the revolutionary cause also not advance its own men, with shameless audacity? We are attacked and we defend ourselves, what could be fairer? They would like to gag us, tie our hands, reduce us to the condition of corpses. That is what we will never permit. From love of our country, we shall ever be at hand to counsel it and point out its true interests. After all, the nation is the absolute master of its own fortune. It votes, and we bow to its will. By belonging to this assembly, where they enjoy absolute freedom of speech, the members of the opposition themselves, are the proof of our respect for the decisions of the universal vote. If the country calls for the Empire with a crushing majority, it is to the country that the revolutionaries should complain. . . . In this parliament every hindrance to free control has today been done away with. It has been the Sovereign’s will to give the great bodies of the

state a more direct role in his policies and that is startling proof of his confidence. From now on it is up to you to debate all acts of authority, with full rights to amend and to express your desires and your reasons for those desires. Every year, the address from the throne will serve as a meeting between the Emperor and the nation's representatives at which these latter will enjoy the opportunity of saying whatever they like with complete freedom. It is from such open-air discussion that strong states are born. The tribune has been restored, this tribune rendered distinguished by so many a speaker whose name history has carved in her annals. A parliament which discusses is a parliament which works. And would you like to learn my whole mind? I will tell you: it makes me happy to see a group of opposition deputies here. In our midst there will always be adversaries who will try to catch us out. Thereby they will serve to bring the honesty of our motives into full daylight. For them we demand the broadest immunity. We fear neither passion nor scandal nor even abuse of free speech, however dangerous such things may be. . . . As for the press, gentlemen, this never has enjoyed more complete freedom under any government resolved to respect it. Every great question, every serious interest has its organ. All that the administration combats is the propagation of false teachings, the public peddling of poison. But for the decent press, which is the great voice of public opinion, we are full of deference. That press aids us in our task, it is the great tool of the century. If the régime did once take hold of it, that was merely not to leave it in the hands of the enemies of the régime. . . ."

Approving laughter now rose. But Rougon was drawing near his peroration. Convulsively, his fingers gripped the timber of the lectern. He leant forward, and his right arm swept the air. His voice rolled out, sonorous, as a powerful river. Suddenly, in the midst of the liberal idyll, a panting frenzy made its appearance. His outstretched fist was like a battering-ram, threatening something in the distance, in space. That invisible foe was the red spectre. In a few dramatic phrases he pointed to that red spectre, brandishing its blood-stained standard, sweeping across the country with incendiary flame, in its wake streams of mud and blood. Now it was the tocsin of days of public disorder that rang in his voice, cut through by the whine of bullets, the crash of the shattered strong-rooms of banks, the money of the middle-classes

pillaged and shared out. The deputies sat pale on their benches. Then Rougon calmed down again. With grand gestures of praise which had all the rhythmic clank of the censor, he wound up with praise of the Emperor.

"Thank God!" he breathed, "we are under the protection of the Prince whom Providence has chosen for us, to save us in a moment of his infinite mercy. In the shelter of that lofty mind we can find rest. He has taken us by the hand and step by step, weaving his way between the reefs, he is leading us to the ultimate port."

There was vociferous applause. For nearly ten minutes the sitting was halted. Deputies rushed across to the minister as he resumed his seat, his forehead moist with sweat, his sides still heaving, out of breath. M. La Rouquette, M. de Combélot and a hundred others congratulated him and reached out their hands to try to seize his as he passed. It was like a sort of earthquake rumbling and thundering through the assembly. Even the public galleries were chattering away and gesticulating. Under the sunlit expanse of the ceiling with all its marbles and its gilt, that luxuriousness which was a compound of temple and public office, there was all the hubbub of the public square, questioning laughter, noisy astonishment, highest admiration, all the clamour of a crowd shaken by strong feelings. For a moment the eyes of the Count de Marsy and Clorinda met. They both tossed their heads, admitting the great man's triumph. By this speech, indeed, Rougon had now begun the prodigious career which was to carry him so very high.

Meanwhile, another deputy had taken his place at the tribune. It was a man with clean-shaven face, waxen white, and long-cut flaxen hair, locks of which even fell to his shoulders. Rigid, without a gesture, he ran his eye through enormous sheets of paper, the manuscript of a speech which he suddenly began to read in a meek voice. The ushers cried:

"Pray silence, gentlemen, pray silence!"

The speaker asked the government for certain explanations. He was very worried by the wait-and-see policy of France, faced with the Italian threat to the Holy See. The temporal power was the sacred ark, and the address should have contained some formal undertaking, not to say an injunction, concerning the integrity of the Papal state. The speech entered into historical considerations, to show that Christian law,

some centuries before the treaties of 1815, had established the political system of Europe. Then came sentences of frightened eloquence, the speaker claiming to see with alarm the dissolution of the ancient order of Europe amid popular convulsions. At some points, when he made certain too direct hostile references to the King of Italy, there was some disturbance in the assembly. But the compact group of clerical deputies on the right, nearly a hundred of them, were most attentive and they approved firmly of every part of the speech, and every time that their colleague referred to the Pope they signified their support with a slight inclination of their heads.

Winding up, the speaker uttered a sentence which was met with many cries of approval.

"I do not like," he said, "to see Venice the superb, the Queen of the Adriatic, turned into an obscure vassal of Turin."

His neck still wet with sweat, his voice husky, his great frame broken by his first speech, Rougon here insisted on replying without a moment's delay. It was a magnificent spectacle. He made the most of his fatigue, he acted a part with it, dragging his feet as he made his way to the tribune, and opening by muttering only half audible words. With bitterness he complained that among the opponents of the government there should be men worthy of respect, who hitherto had been so devoted to the institutions of the Empire. Surely there was some misunderstanding. Surely they could not really wish to swell the ranks of the revolutionaries? Surely they did not want to undermine a power whose constant effort was directed to assuring the victory of the faith? And, turning to the right, he addressed emotional gestures to it and spoke with a humility full of guile, as if to powerful enemies, the only enemies whom he really feared.

Little by little, however, his voice reassumed all its power, till he was filling the assembly with its bellowing, and as he spoke he thumped his chest with blows of his massive fist.

"We have been charged with irreligiosity. That was a lie! We are the respectful children of the Church and it is our happiness not to have lost our belief. . . . Yes, gentlemen, faith is our guide and our support in this task of ruling, which indeed is often so burdensome. Whatever would come of us, could we not thus deliver ourselves into the hands of Providence? Our sole ambition is to be the humble instrument of His designs, the passive tool of the will of the Lord. There

you have the force which authorizes us to speak out and do a little good. . . . And, gentlemen, I am happy here now to kneel with all the fervour of my Catholic heart before the sovereign Pontiff, before that august veteran of whom France will ever be the vigilant, devoted daughter."

The applause had not waited for the conclusion of the sentence. Rougon's triumph turned into an apotheosis. The assembly reverberated with it.

As they came out, Clorinda was on the watch for him. They had not spoken a single word to each other for three years. When he did appear, a rejuvenated man, as it were suddenly delivered of a burden, in one hour having given the lie to his whole political life and ready now, under the device of parliamentarism, to satisfy his furious thirst for authority, she was compelled to yield to her natural impulse. Her hand outstretched, she went up to him, her eyes moist and so deeply moved that her mere glance was a caress, and cried:

"Oh, you! After all, how beautifully strong you are!"

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